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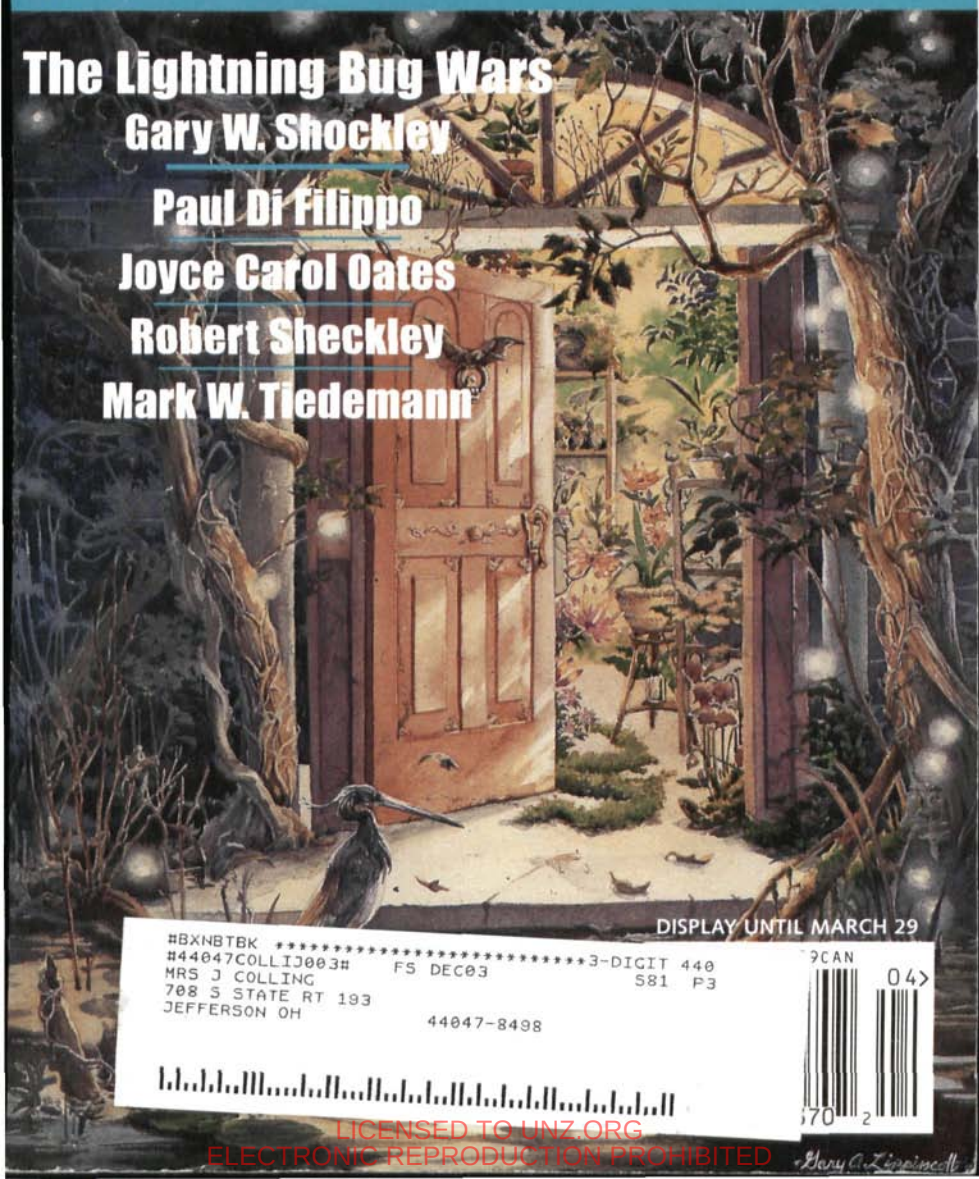

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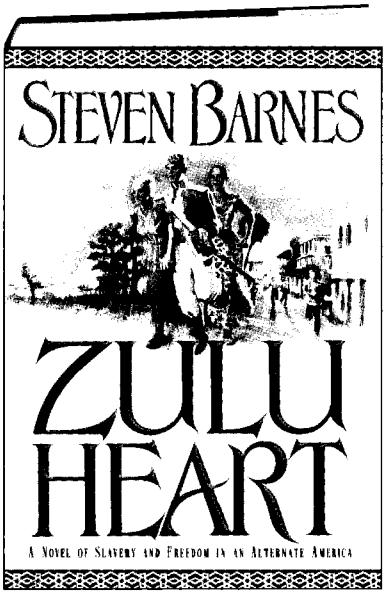

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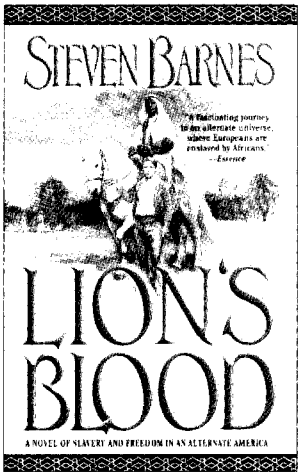

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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GORDON VAN GELDER, Publisher/Editor BARBARA J. NORTON, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor KEITH KAHLA, Assistant Publisher
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Since the last time we published one of Mark Tiedemann's stories (in the Sept. 2000 issue), Mark has published four novels: Metal of Night, Compass Reach, *and two "Isaac Asimov's Robot Mystery" novels. His next book,* Peace and Memory, *is due out in May and he says he is working on two more novels now. Fortunately, he has found some time to write short fiction again. His latest story ventures into the near future with a look at how workers' rights might evolve...and how some people might be affected by the changes.*

Scabbing

By Mark W. Tiedemann

MS. HELLER ALWAYS CALLED me "Richard" when I did particularly well, which meant I walked home quickly and alone after classes, before the teasing and other scrap started. Todd, Keith, and Pete tried to catch up, but I ducked them through an overgrown yard behind an abandoned four-family. Todd was never a problem, but Keith and Pete came from old union families and didn't know when to let up sometimes. I sprinted down Lennox to the next alley and came out on Sutter, which made it a long walk home, but better than listening to all the scrap about "bucking the line" and "management trainee."

An EMS van stood in front of our house. I could see the flashing lights from the end of the block and I started running.

They had just gotten Dad onto the gurney when I opened the screen door. Mom looked at me and immediately reached out. Her face was pale and her eyes intense, but she held it together the way she always did in emergencies.

"What?" I started asking. "What is it? What happened?"

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"A stroke," Mom said, pulling me out of the techs' way as they wheeled Dad out the front door.

Neighbors stood on their porches, watching.

The doors of the van slid shut and the ambulance shot off up the street.

The emergency room staff took Dad away before we arrived and tried to get Mom to sign waivers. She pushed the paperwork back at the admitting nurse and said she'd wait till Dad's rep got there.

Howard, the shift supervisor from the plant, came through the doors first. I don't know why I was relieved to see him, but it didn't matter just then. Any relief was good. He hugged Mom, whose hands began to tremble.

"He was just lying on the floor by the refrigerator," she said, "he wouldn't move, wouldn't answer me, but he had a pulse, I checked for that, and called — "

"Take it easy, Ginny," Howard said, his deep voice oddly quiet. "Go slow. You did all right."

She shook her head. "He just got home from the plant. You were there, did he act funny?"

"He complained of a headache, that's about it." Howard shrugged. "He was just in to run a diagnostic on his surrogate, but it was in the middle of a run, so I told him to come back later, second shift."

Mom nodded absently. She was beginning to shake, little tremors that rippled her shoulders every minute or so. I'd only seen her do that once before, when I was small and the union went out on a wildcat strike. I don't remember much except late night calls and graffiti and arguments. Everyone was scared. It only lasted a couple of weeks, and by then Mom and Dad had lapsed into silence around each other.

Howard kept talking, drawing Mom out till the union rep arrived. Then they went to the admittance desk and started haggling over insurance and doctors and what to do.

Twenty minutes went by and Mom suddenly waved to me. An orderly took us to Dad's room, where he lay in a white bed, tubes running into him. A doctor came in right after us and took Mom, Howard, and the rep aside, leaving me alone again.

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Dad was only forty-two. I stared at him, pale and unconscious, hooked up to all those med monitors, and it scared me. I heard the doctor say he'd had a major rupture in the left hemisphere. Any more delay getting him to the clinic and he'd have been dead.

I was sixteen and my dad was suddenly an invalid.

A lot of stuff goes through your head — not thoughts, nothing that mass, just stuff, like neutrinos raining past — a lot of it really self-centered. What would this do to my schooling? What would this do to my list of chores? What would this do to my vacations? What would this do to — fill in the blank. Along with this, though, parallel to it is this enormous wrestling match with reality. That's Dad in there, gone, half his brain scrapped, personality probably scrambled. But he'll get better, medical science is wonderful, in fact the doctors have exaggerated the problem, he's really just suffering from a mass headache and as soon as they finished IVing acetaminophen through him he'll open his eyes, rub his temples, and crack a bad joke. That's Dad in there, mostly dead, and you can't let go. Mom can't handle everything by herself and you're just sixteen, you can't handle anything and what will you do when Mom needs to shift the load — and back and forth like that. There are no priorities; this is a new world and you just don't have a map and there's no good way to describe this mix of stressed love, fear, concern, self-pity, and terror. No standards. So I just stood there, expressionless from what Mom told me later, and watched the machines try to save Dad's life and do what they could to repair the damage, and looking solid mass way beyond my years. A lot of heroism is just popular misinterpretation after the event.

And added to all this spin, I had school the next day.

We stayed at the hospital for the next several hours. A few of Dad's friends showed up, offering support — Cliff especially, my friend Todd's father. They had their own troubles — surrogate problems that had been stuck in committee for weeks — but he showed up. My dad and Cliff had been buddies since school, saw the last of the labor draft before the new reforms came in, managed all their lives to stick together. I don't even know if my dad knew Cliff was there.

Late that night, Howard took me home while Mom stayed at the hospital.

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* * *

I was surprised when I got a three-day absence approved. Usually nothing short of death is acceptable, but maybe the union rep talked to them. They sent me home with a syllabus so I wouldn't fall behind. Todd and Keith told me to link up if I needed help with anything — which was their way of saying that they needed help — and I told them I'd let them know how things went.

On the third day a truck rolled up to the house and a team came in to install a home monitor unit for Dad. I watched, fascinated, and noticed immediately that there were added attachments. I asked some questions, but the workers ignored me. Mom came home before they left, so I didn't have to worry about signing anything and having it declared invalid later because of my age. She insisted they take her through the machinery. They were put out, but Mom can be very insistent, so in a tired-but-superior voice the crew foreman explained it all.

"Blood pressure, EKG, EEG, choline-dopamine balance, platelet, white and red corpuscle count, blood sugars, renal, protein absorption, metabolic — "

He tapped the gauges and the controls in turn. Mom nodded at each one and he went faster with each nod. She kept up, asked a couple of questions, then pointed to one section he hadn't mentioned.

"Uh, that's the augment download," he said. "There's a diagnostic for you to run through with that one. I'm not really sure how it works."

"Let's go over it together then, shall we?"

He didn't look happy. I leaned against the door to the spare bedroom, where all this machinery had been set up, and listened intently. Pretty soon I realized that Mom had squeezed a DNA out of the insurance company. A direct neural augment. The moment I understood that, I blanked on the rest of the tutorial.

When the crew left, I stopped Mom in the hall.

"They're wiring Dad up?"

"Don't start. You know as well as I do that he'd go crazy if he couldn't function."

"Sure, but — "

"It doesn't have to be general knowledge. You want me to go over the whys and wherefores?"

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"No, no, you're taking me wrong. I think it's great. It's just — well, how's the local going to take it?"

She gave me a funny look, then shook her head. "I already went over it with the union rep. As long as he doesn't run workshare with it there's no problem. It's a medical augment, just like a prosthetic limb." She patted my arm. "Are you caught up? You have to go back to class tomorrow."

I nodded. "When's Dad coming home?"

"Tomorrow night. The augment's being installed today. I have to get back to the hospital, but I wanted to be here for this." She looked a little afraid just then. "It's going to be fine."

TODD AND KEITH waited outside school the first morning I returned.

"Hey," Todd said. "How's your dad? I heard what happened."

"They're bringing him home today," I said. "I don't know. He had a hemorrhage."

"Is he gonna be all right?" Todd asked.

Keith gave him a look. "Sure he is, he just has to learn to function on half a brain."

Todd blushed, embarrassed.

"Real sensitive," I said.

Keith frowned. "I didn't — sorry."

"Did you keep up?" Todd asked.

I held up my laptop. "Somehow."

"Good. Olan's going through standings this morning," Todd said. "You know where Local 255 ranked this quarter?"

I looked at him and shrugged.

"Fifth in the city."

"Anything in the top twenty-five is mass," Keith said.

"Solid mass," Todd agreed. "We're kicking butt."

"Did he post individual rankings?" I asked.

"No," Keith said, cocking an eyebrow, "but I heard you did number two in overall. Have to start calling you Sir, Mr. Management."

I felt my ears warm. "Don't even start."

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Keith laughed. "What, you're thinking maybe Harvard? Berkeley? Cornell?"

"Hey," Todd said.

"Hey what? I'm just spinning him!"

"Spin someone else," I said, pushing past.

"Hey, I didn't mean anything — "

I went into the polytech. I was in no mood for that massless scrap.

I turned in my work at each class, thanking each instructor for their concern and for the time off. Ms. Heller asked if I had a few minutes after classes. I had to postpone since Dad was supposed to come home that night, and she said fine, later would be all right. Then she handed out an essay assignment which made several people groan.

"I want an essay on the 29th Amendment which designated labor as a property and the Jarelman Court's decision abolishing the labor draft."

I thought, again? It seemed like every year somebody wanted us to do something on that subject. I think I had a gigabyte of material stored in my home computer, everything I'd ever learned about it since second grade.

But it was a union school and it was traditional to bitch, but none of us would fail to turn in the report. Especially not on that topic.

"There goes the weekend," Todd muttered in the hall after. "Hey, you want to work this together?"

I shook my head. "Gotta be home. Dad's going to need me and I don't think Mom would be too happy about company just yet."

"Maybe online?"

I looked at Todd. He did really mass in the technical subjects, but his weakness was in history and politics. It was funny — he understood the wildest stuff about electrical engineering and data compilers and robotics, but when it came to court actions and legislative procedures he was massless.

"Maybe," I said. "Might not be a bad idea."

He brightened then. Keith waited outside. Todd broke off, waving at me, and went to join him and Pete. I watched them go off together, heading for the handball courts, and wished I could join them.

Dad sat up in the bed in the middle of all the equipment. Cables hung from the left side of his head, down below the level of the mattress, and

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then disappeared into the tangle of wiring in the base of the monitors. He wore a light robe that fell open over his broad, hair-covered chest. He hadn't shaved in a couple of days and he grinned lopsidedly at me, teeth bright against gray-black stubble.

Mom sat in a chair beside him, holding his right hand. She smiled at me nervously.

"S-ss-thon...," he said. He shook his head. "It get better...."

"Hi, Dad."

Dad winked — sort of, since both eyelids fluttered down, then the right one stayed down while the other jerked upward. He patted Mom's hand lightly.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Half-athed — assed — shit, I'll get this right." His left hand sort of waved at the monitors. "Whaddya think?"

"Mass."

"And a lot of it. My new mind."

"Sam," Mom said, half-critically.

Dad laughed. "Well? It ith — is...hm."

"Are you guys hungry? I can cook tonight."

"No' me," Dad said. "But make your mother eat."

"I'm not really — "

"Ginny...."

Mom nodded, then looked up at me and smiled. Things were settling down for her, I guess, because she had that look right before she just lets everything slide.

"Spaghetti," I said. "You eat some, too, Dad."

"Right. I can handle spaghetti like this."

Mom had to feed him, but he ate a lot, which made both of us feel better. Mom went over the various service requirements of the set-up — for the time being he had a dedicated waste disposal unit that needed new cartridges every four or five days or the house would start smelling — and gave me a pager slaved to the monitor. In case she was out and Dad needed help or had a medical emergency, the pager would signal me. I wondered how they'd feel about that at school, but I didn't say anything.

"Thon — son — shit — Rich — "

"Yeah, Dad?" Mom was in the bathroom.

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"Need a favor. Call Howard at the plant. Want you to go check Difty. Didn't finish the diagnoth-tic."

"Howard said you did."

He frowned at that and seemed to look around, as if trying to locate something. He shook his head. "Don't remember. I feel better if — would you talk to Howard and see if he'll let you run it again?"

"Can't one of the other guys do that for you?"

He shook his head. "I'd rather they di'n't. Pleath — please."

I shrugged and said sure, then Mom came back and told me to do my homework. All in all it didn't look too bad; in about three weeks he was supposed to start getting the curve on how to function with the augment and our duties would slack off. Two months, the doctors and engineers said, and he'd be practically normal, except for his sleep cycle. The DNA was "on" all the time, no way internally to shut it off, so Dad had to plug himself into the monitor to sleep. A timer rebooted him after a certain period, but we found out pretty quickly that sleep came almost instantly. Dad was on the switch as much as the augment. Eventually, when the medical monitors could be removed, a smaller augment box could be installed in the master bedroom and they could sleep together again, but now — and for the first time in their marriage, so Mom told me — separate beds. Separate bedrooms. Still, it didn't look bad.

HOWARD DIDN'T like it, but he agreed to let me do the diagnostic on Difty. He let me onto the floor Saturday morning. "Shop steward doesn't come in on the weekend, so there shouldn't be any problem. Just be quick, okay?" He took me over to Difty's station and looked around for monitors. He nodded and told me he'd be back in ten.

Difty continued making spot welds on the line of conduit that conveyor-belted past while I ran the diagnostic. The surrogate was old, the cover plates discolored, a few bent out of shape. It was large and cumbersome and unlovely, especially when compared to some of the newer, sleeker models that were almost sensual in the smoothness of their parts. Dad had talked occasionally about buying a new one, but it just never seemed the right time. Difty did its job well and that was good enough.

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The small screen flickered unevenly as the data scrolled up. When Difty finished this shift it had to go to the parks and recreation motor pool to draw its assignment for landscaping duty. The instructions were already spooled in its standby memory. Meanwhile there was part of an engineering problem crunching in its analytics. That surprised me; I didn't think Difty handled brainshare jobs anymore. The company logo appeared — CDR Limited — then a problem flag on that section, so I keyed for more data.

PROGRAM ERROR, KEY F1, RECONFIGURE

Great. Maybe Difty shouldn't be handling brainshare. If it lost the program before completion the contractor could deduct a penalty. I pressed F1.

The screen went blank.

I stared at it for several seconds. Then the spotwelder sputtered to silence and Difty's arms stopped. The assembly line halted.

"Oh, shit."

I stabbed the reboot and waited anxiously for some response. "What the hell is going on?"

Howard was coming toward me down the catwalk.

"I don't know," I said, waving at the screen. "I was running Difty's diagnostics and suddenly — crash!"

He glanced at the screen, then tapped in a series of commands. Still nothing. Up and down the line other surrogates stood at attention, their manipulators ready and waiting.

"Damnit," Howard spat. "Looks like — wait."

The control icon winked on. Howard lunged a hand at the keypad, typed in Difty's reboot. The screen came on with a program query: INSTRUCTIONS?

"Great," Howard said. "You cleared her memory."

"Oh, no...."

He turned away and worked at the station monitor keyboard for a moment.

"No problem, simple install. There."

The screen flickered with the instructions, then Difty restarted. The line moved again.

"What happened?"

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"I don't know. I found a brainshare program running and it flagged a problem. When I tried to reconfigure, she crashed."

"I'd get on the line to that contractor and find out what was in that program. Who is it?"

"CDR Limited."

He pulled his memopad and made a note, then tapped for data. After a few seconds, he nodded. "I've got notes here of other problems with CDR brainshare routines. You're not the only one to have had trouble. You want me to file a grievance?"

"Sure, I guess. I have to call parks and recreation now," I said. "I think their routine was crashed as well."

"How many leases have you got her running?"

"Just three."

Howard pursed his lips. "Maybe Sam oughta consider getting a new surrogate. Or getting this one overhauled at least. I'll get this in the circuit for you."

WHEN I GOT HOME I found two union reps in the living room with Mom.

"Richard," she said, "would you mind looking in on your father? And I took some chicken out of the freezer for tonight. Maybe you could get it started?"

"Sure."

I nodded to the visitors, who watched me cross the living room and leave. I heard talk start as soon as I was out of their sight, which annoyed me. But Mom only calls me Richard when she's worrying over something, so I didn't make an issue of it. I knocked on Dad's door — less than a week and already it was "Dad's Door" — and entered.

"Hey," I said.

He grinned at me. "Hey." He nodded in the direction of the living room. "They thtill out there?"

"Yeah. Who are they?"

"Can't you tell? Inveth — investigators."

"Why?"

He tapped his skull. "My new mind. Questions of status."

"How'd they know?"

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"Insurance."

"Oh."

"Don't worry about it. Formality. They're worried if I might use this thing to make money. I told your mother, hey, I don't have time for that. We got vacation plans this year, all I want is to be back on my feet."

I nodded. I didn't know what to say. I believed him, sure, it would be stupid to violate union rules and risk his brotherhood, but I'd heard stories — everyone hears stories — and some of them, it seems, it doesn't matter what everybody intends, it just works out that way. But he was right, we had vacation plans and the doctors said two months before he could reasonably navigate with this new stuff, so what was there to worry about? I had two more quarters before performance reports to sweat for third stage entry. If I passed those high enough I could opt out of the union schools if I wanted and get admission to a college outside the brotherhood status. Then —

"I gotta get supper ready, Dad. You need anything?"

"No. Thanks, Rich." As I opened the door he said, "Everything's gonna be fine. You know that, don't you?"

"Sure. Solid mass."

Pete, Jack, Toby, Larry, and Kyle met me out in front of school the next morning. They blocked my way. Pete and Kyle were both bigger than me.

"We heard your dad's gone management," Pete said.

"What? My dad's had a stroke."

"Sure, but he's been wired up. He's a chiphead."

"So he can walk and eat without help. What's the problem?"

"Chiphead."

I pushed through them, my heart pounding. None of them followed and by the time I got to homeroom I started feeling stupid for being afraid.

Todd and Keith usually sat next me, one on either side, but today they sat three rows back. Todd waved at me, looking apologetic, but Keith wouldn't even acknowledge my presence. Pete and the others came in together and sat in the back row where they usually sat, but I could feel them staring at me.

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I fixed my attention forward and told myself it would pass. They'd get over it. All I had to do was be patient.

After orientation I applied for an appointment with my counselor. By fourth period he verified it for study hall that day. I was relieved but surprised. Usually there was a two- or three-day wait.

Sixth period was my study hall, last period for the day for me. I excused myself and hurried down to the front offices. Mr. Jay was out for a few minutes, so I sat outside his door and waited.

"Rich?"

I looked up and saw Ms. Heller standing in the hallway, looking at me. I nodded and said hello and she came closer.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Sure. I'm waiting for Mr. Jay."

Her expression shifted through degrees of uncertainty and finally settled on concern.

"If you need any help, talk to me, okay?"

"Sure."

I watched her walk away.

"Hey, Rich," Mr. Jay said, coming from the other end of the hallway. "Sorry. Paperwork. Come on in."

I sat down in his little office.

"So," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"I'm not sure. I'd like to know what my options are for early graduation. I mean, if there are any options. And — " I didn't intend to say this just then, but it came out anyway. "And what are my options for third stage if I have to leave school now."

He looked startled and laughed. "Whoa, what do you mean, have to leave?" He started typing on his keyboard. "Last time we talked there weren't any problems — "

"No, last time we talked there weren't."

He nodded, half-listening, and studied his screen. "No, your scores are still upper twenty. No ranking problems there."

"That's not the trouble. I mean — "

He pushed a button and his door slid shut. "Okay, we're private. Tell me what's wrong."

I told him about Dad's stroke and his new wiring. Mr. Jay listened

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expressionlessly. I didn't know how much he wanted to hear, so I added what had happened that morning and my worries about exactly that kind of thing affecting my schooling. He frowned briefly, but nodded.

"I don't really see a problem, Rich," he said finally. "What you're telling me is that your father has had a prosthesis implanted. That doesn't constitute a violation of union rules."

"Unless he uses it for work."

He shrugged. "What does that mean? He has to supervise his surrogate and to do that he uses his brain. I mean, he has to think about it, right? Is that a violation of union rules?"

"No, but that's not what I mean."

"You mean if he starts taking on brainshare work. Well, he understands the restrictions, right?"

"Well, sure. He's been IAMS for — god, forever."

"So what's the problem? Beyond a couple of bullies who think they can harass you, life goes on. This won't change anything."

I wished I felt so certain. It must have shown in my face, because Mr. Jay waved his hand in the air the way he does when he wants to cut to the bottom line.

"This is a change in your home structure. Some morons are going to be threatened by the possible abuse, but that passes. These kids are your friends, right? They won't shut you out forever. And so what if they do? If they were really your friends they wouldn't act like that. You can always transfer to another local if it gets bad, but at this stage I'd recommend you stick to your course selections and your instructors and to hell with the rest of the world."

I was a little shocked to hear him talk this way, but it made sense and I felt better. He talked to me like an adult. My doubts weren't gone, but they seemed a lot less important.

Howard was there when I got home that night. He sat beside Dad. Mom was there, too, and none of them looked very happy. I stared at them for a time until Dad said hello, then Howard nodded, and Mom excused herself to get dinner started.

"What's wrong?" I asked, and because of the way Mr. Jay had treated me I felt that I deserved to get the same from them.

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"Oh, just detail crap," Dad said. "No big thing."

Howard raised his eyebrows at him, but didn't add anything.

"Are you staying for dinner, Howard?" I asked.

"No, Rich, I gotta get home. I just came by to give your father some updates." He stood, gave Dad another look, then said good night to everyone.

Mom didn't say anything through dinner, just stared into her plate. Later I heard her and Dad fighting again. I buried myself in overtime and did my best to ignore them.

THE SAME BUNCH met me outside school in the morning, but they didn't say anything, just watched me. Someone had drawn on my flatscreen in homeroom in marker — MANAGEMENT! — and the rest of the day no one but instructors talked to me. I caught Todd looking very guilty a couple of times, but all he'd do was wave at me when he thought no one else noticed.

The rest of the week went on this way. By Friday I believed Mr. Jay hadn't known what he was talking about. Nothing was passing. It wasn't getting any worse, but this was bad enough. Fine, I thought, if you massless morons are going to be this scab, hell with you. It gives me more time to get through second stage and out of here. It felt like a plan and I went home relieved.

The picture window had been smashed. A pair of surrogates were putting up a new one. A third was scrubbing black graffiti off our walk.

Mom wasn't there. Dad's door was open a crack, but all I did was knock and tell him I was home. I thought maybe I should ask what had happened, but I knew and I didn't feel like listening to any more massless reassurance, especially not from Dad.

In my room I accessed the web and started looking for recruiters' sites. But I realized pretty quickly that I couldn't tell the legitimate ones from the traps. The last thing I needed was to bring more trouble on by admitting on the web that I wanted to leave the union school.

There's always someone who doesn't want to stay with the union. You hear stories about them; once in a while they appear on the web. It's massless. At least, I'd always thought so. I wondered then when it had

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changed. Dad's stroke triggered a lot, but I knew better than to accept that as the sole cause. How long had I been thinking this way?

Mom came home then. She looked in and said hi, then went to the kitchen. I didn't pay attention for a time until I heard shouting. She and Dad were at it again. I closed my door and tried to find Todd on the web.

I found him in a chat room, but he wouldn't respond. He dropped out and I tried to follow, but it looked like he had just left the web completely.

Ten minutes later my phone chirped.

"Hey, Rich."

"Todd."

"Sorry for ignoring you."

"Yeah, well."

"Look, right now — "

"Right now some scab is saying my father has gone management and you, you massless idiot, you believe it."

"No, I don't!"

"Then — "

"What do you want me to do? Scab Keith and Pete and Kyle?"

"You're scabbing me."

"Rich!"

"It's okay. Loyalty's cheaper in bunches, I understand. I just thought it'd be solid mass for someone to stand up for me."

He was quiet for a time. Then: "What are you going to do?"

"Wait for it to pass I guess."

"Rich — it won't."

I wanted to argue with him, but it sounded right. I really didn't think it would pass, either.

"What'd I do?" I asked. "It's my dad, not me. Can't you morons cope with that."

"Don't you think it's the same with us?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Look, I have to go. What are you going to do?"

"Try to find another school, I guess. I won't tolerate this shit."

"You know how hard that'd be?"

"What do you suggest?"

"I don't know. File a grievance maybe."

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"Against my parents?"

"It could get you into a different union, take the pressure off."

"Shit, they're my parents, Todd! They aren't the ones scabbing me!"

"But — " There was a pause, then: "I have to go. Sorry."

After he broke off, I sat there more confused than ever. Dad always said it was worthless to try to negotiate from adrenaline, that the minute your emotions started dictating the conversation it was all over. I guess he was right. I hadn't said one thing I'd wanted to say.

I could still hear my parents arguing, a muffled rumble off in the distance.

I left early the next morning. Todd was coming out of his house when I got there. He saw me and froze on the steps. Then he glanced back at his front door and hurried toward me.

"I'm supposed to meet Keith in a few minutes," he said.

"Is that a request for me to leave?"

He blushed and looked at his feet. "Rich — "

"We've been friends a long time."

"Yeah, well."

"You said something last night. You said it was the same for all of you. What did you mean?"

He looked back toward his house nervously, then nodded for us to walk. At the end of the block he said, "Our parents. They don't want us around you."

"What? Why?"

"Because of your dad."

"But — Cliff and Sam have been friends all their lives. You're telling me — "

"Come on, Rich, don't be the same massless idiot you think the rest of us are!"

I rounded on him, put my hand against his chest. "You're telling me you're all listening to your parents? Half the time you make it a joke not to. Now — when it comes to something important — you do?"

"What do you want? Yeah, when it comes to something important we do. So do you. The trouble is what you think is important isn't the same as what they think is."

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"Friendship — "

He stepped back. "Don't do that, Rich! What do you want from me? I can't be your friend! Not now, not anymore!"

"Why not?" Then: "Is your dad beating you again?"

Todd looked about to cry. He shook his head and sniffed loudly. "We just can't! It costs too much! Now leave me alone!"

He pushed past me. As I turned I saw Keith and Pete standing a few meters away, hands on hips, glaring at me. Todd went by them and said something, but neither Keith or Pete moved.

"Why don't you leave him alone?" Keith asked.

"Why don't you stay out of other peoples' business?"

"Hey, scab, I don't need to listen to your massless waste."

"Then don't."

Todd stopped. "Keith, come on. Let's get to school."

Keith pointed a finger at me. "Stay away from Todd. You upset him."

"I upset him! His only problem is you morons."

Keith stepped toward me. Todd hurried up behind him and grabbed his arm.

"Don't," he said.

Keith looked at him. "Make up your mind. Whose side are you on?"

"Whose side do you think I'm on?" I shouted. "My dad had a stroke! He would've been bedridden, hooked up to a machine for the rest of his life!"

"And now he's management!" Keith snapped back. "He made a choice! My dad said if he had any loyalty in him at all he'd have opted for the machine."

"Your dad's got room to talk! He didn't have a stroke! He's not an invalid!"

"Loyalty's not always convenient!"

"No, I guess it isn't. But the way you're acting you sure wish it were."

Keith broke free of Todd's grip and swung on me. I ducked it and backpedaled. He tried to hit me twice more before Todd and Pete got hold of his arms.

"Get away from us!" Keith screamed.

"I got one more question."

Pete looked at me. "Can't you hear, scab?"

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"I can hear. You can't. Even if what your parents are saying is true about my dad, what does that have to do with me? You're scabbing me!"

"Disloyalty runs in families!" Keith said. "Like father, like son! Blood tells! You can't choose your family!" Tears were running down his face now and saliva sprayed with each phrase.

Everyone was crying except Pete, but he looked like it wouldn't take much to get him started. I wanted to run. Hard as it was, I made myself walk away.

Mom didn't eat in the morning. She sat staring at me, her forehead creased.

"Mom — "

"Difty broke down," she said.

"What?"

"The brainshare your father was running crashed it."

"I know that. Howard said it was the company's fault."

She shook her head. "They're fighting it. Meantime, there's something wrong with Difty we can't fix until the grievance is settled."

"But — "

She stood. "I have to go. Make sure your father eats something, will you?"

I tried to get more out of her, but she hustled around the house gathering her things and hurried out the door. It sounded like the same massless crap Todd's family was stuck in. I went to Dad's door and knocked on it, half hoping he was asleep and wouldn't hear. But he called to come in.

He looked a lot better. His color was nearly back to normal and his hair was starting to grow in over the surgery. He grinned at me and waved at a chair.

"Sit, sit," he said. His speech came out sharp and precise.

"I guess it's working, huh?"

"Oh, you mean the hardware? Yeah, it is. I feel pretty good. Might be this was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"I heard Difty crashed."

Dad shrugged. "That brainshare messed up more than we thought. I

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tried to install a new brainshare and the whole system just broke down. Howard's fighting with the local over maintenance. They won't allow the new claim until the previous one's been settled, and CDR is fighting the claim."

"Why? I mean, if they've been having trouble all along like Howard said — "

"That's exactly why. If they don't fight it they stand to lose a lot. They have to win or risk bankruptcy. At least that's what Howard's been telling me."

"But — the local should know that. Why would they leave you without a surrogate because some corporate is jamming the process?"

Dad shook his head but he wouldn't look at me. I felt myself getting anxious.

"I have to get to school," I said, standing.

Dad looked up at me, surprised. "Oh. Yeah. Well, come talk to me some more when you get home. I'm not a scrambled mess anymore, I can manage." He laughed.

"No, you're mass. Solid mass."

"One of these days you're going to have to explain to me just what that means."

I left as quickly as I could.

Todd didn't show up for classes the next day. Or the day after. Keith and Pete and the others wouldn't even look at me, so I didn't bother to ask them anything. By the third day I started getting worried. I asked Mr. Olan if Todd had called in sick.

"You didn't hear?" he asked.

"Hear what? No, I — "

"Todd won't be coming back here. He filed a grievance against his parents. He's being sequestered in committee till his case is reviewed."

"Grievance...."

Mr. Olan looked uncomfortable. For a moment I thought he'd drop it. He'd answered my question. But he lowered his voice and added, "I heard his father beat him up pretty badly. It's my understanding the man has a history of violent temper. They must have had an argument."

"Is he all right?"

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"I don't know, Rich. That's all I heard. He must be, if he filed. At least physically."

I let the cut pass and thanked him. By the end of the day I'd convinced myself that it was my fault. The argument must have been over me, Dad, this crazy situation. If I hadn't pushed Todd, made him feel guilty about what he and the others were doing — but even as I took all this blame onto myself I knew it was massless. It didn't seem like Todd to do something this drastic over one incident. Maybe it had been building for a long time, years maybe. Maybe his dad never had stopped the abuse.

Howard was at our house again. He and Dad sat at the kitchen table talking. They both stopped when I walked in and looked at me.

"Sorry to interrupt," I said.

"No, hey, Rich!" Dad called.

"I gotta get, Sam," Howard said, standing.

Dad blinked at him as if caught by a practical joke. Howard smiled at me briefly. I nodded back and went to my room to drop off my backpack. When I came out, Dad was just closing the front door. I watched him shuffle back to the kitchen. He looked distracted. Then, as he walked by me, completely oblivious to my presence, I saw the chip in his interface jack.

"You're doing brainshare," I said.

He looked up startled. "Uh...."

"Howard set this up, didn't he?"

"Rich, listen. I — "

"He crashed Difty, too, I'll bet. Not the first time but afterward."

Dad shook his head and walked away. I went back to my room. I hate it when people tell you they don't know how they feel. How can they not know? But I sat there in the dimming light and couldn't understand what I felt. Maybe because I felt everything — anger, resentment, frustration, pity, fear, betrayal, despair — and there wasn't room for them all, so they turned over, queuing up to have a second here, a minute there, never giving me a chance to settle on one and really feel it. I stared out the window at the neighbor's wall as the Sun went down and just spun along with it all.

I decided I didn't have any right to judge Dad. None of my choices seemed worth the cost, what made me think his were any better?

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Because I'm the child, he's the adult.

Whatever that has to do with anything.

Dad sat in the living room with the lights out, near the bay windows. I could only see half his face. I wanted to apologize, give him something to make up for the hurt I might have caused. I wanted to tell him it was all right, that he was solid mass by me, and it didn't matter what he had to do to make the bills, he was my father and that mattered more than the rest.

But before I could say a single word he said, "Your mother left."

I understood so fast that I didn't have time to pretend not to. "Why?"

"Hm? Oh. Nobody stopped talking to her if that's what you mean. She wasn't in trouble at work, nothing like that. She — " He swallowed loudly and I knew he was fighting to keep calm. It didn't work, his voice shook a little, his eyes glittered. "She just couldn't accept this. Her family — they — well, they're real traditional."

After a while I knew he had forgotten I was there. I left him alone.

I WOKE TO SHOUTING. It came through the door muffled and faint, but I wasn't sleeping soundly anyway. I lay there for a couple of minutes trying to ignore it, but it persisted, so I climbed out of bed and pulled on my pants and a T-shirt.

The front door stood open. The voices grew louder as I came up to it, until I could make out Dad's voice. A flashing red and white light pulsed against the screen door. I stepped onto the porch.

Two police cruisers blocked the street in front of our house, both with their lights going. Neighbors stood across the street in a huddle. On our lawn Dad stood face to face with three cops and two other men dressed in dark clothes. One of the cops held a baseball bat at his side and I recognized it as my old little league slugger.

" — fuckers spray painting my house, damnit!" I heard Dad say. One of the cops spoke quietly and Dad made a sharp slicing gesture. "Bullshit! I been putting up with this now for weeks and I've had about enough! They come around here again I'm taking steps!"

I came down the porch stairs and started across the lawn. One of the men looked at me and I recognized Todd's father, Cliff. His face was tight

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and angry, one solid mass pissed expression. I didn't know the other man.

"You can't be swinging on people, sir," another cop said. "If there's a problem, you call us."

"I called you assholes when they busted my window and spray painted 'scab bastard' on my sidewalk! All I got was a bored file clerk who took my statement and no action! You can't protect me, damnit, I'll do it myself!"

"Sir — "

"What do you expect?" Cliff said. "Half his brain is meatless. Fucking chiphead."

I stopped. Everyone stopped, even the cops, who glared at Cliff. The first one to move was my Dad. He growled deep in his throat, hunched down, and swung his left fist. I heard the biting snap as he connected, saw Cliff stagger backward. I shouted something. Two of the cops moved to intercept Dad, but he twisted around and slipped their grip and hit Cliff again. This time he went down. The other man bolted and ran. Dad dropped onto Cliff's chest and began driving punches.

I ran forward and tried to pull him off. He didn't look around, just whipped out his arm and threw me back. Then the cop with my bat stepped up and rammed it into Dad's back, between his shoulder blades. He arched backward and almost fell over. He threw one more punch and the cop hit him again. Dad toppled sideways off of Cliff, who scrambled backward.

"Jesus, the man's crazy!" Cliff yelled. His face was dark with blood running from his nose and mouth. He got to his feet.

The other two cops moved to secure Dad, but he managed to get to his feet first. One of the cops snagged his shirt, but Dad whirled around and the sleeve ripped. His eyes were large, scary in the flashing lights, and he dodged the cops one more time and went after Cliff.

I jumped up and tried to stop him. I got my arms around him, but he just walked with me. I screamed at him to stop, calling his name over and over. He turned then and tried to pry me off. My grip broke and I fell away. He started for Cliff again.

I ran forward and wrapped my arms around his shoulders —

— and sparks danced over my eyes, all my muscles seized up. I couldn't let go, I could only watch his face contort, eyes bulging, tongue

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pressing out between his teeth, and I could smell a faint odor of burning plastic.

We jerked in place together until finally the current from the police taser cut off and we fell in a heap on the grass. I couldn't see clearly and my entire body felt bruised. I rolled back and forth, right on the verge of passing out. Something sharp bit into my left side and I reached down to find the prong of the taser jabbing me. I pulled it out and sat up.

Dad was down jerking like an epileptic.

"Dad!" I crawled toward him.

He wouldn't stop twitching. I grabbed his shoulders to try to stop him. His convulsions were tremendous. That close I could smell burning and I could hear a faint buzzing.

"Call an ambulance!" I screamed. "Call an ambulance! You hit him in the head! Call an ambulance!"

I kept screaming it until the EMS unit arrived.

It was just a taser, but the EMS people said that the voltage was enough to scramble the implants. The cop had fired right when I grabbed Dad and the current passed through me into him and fried his skull. The bolt disrupted everything, heated the hardware up, burned a hole in the rest of his brain.

Todd finally dropped a line on the net. "Hey, I made it out. Are you going to file a grievance? After that, we can be friends again."

But it didn't work that way. Mom came home, handled all the funeral arrangements with the competence I had always found comforting, and the insurance was enough to get us a brand new surrogate. Dad, it turned out, hadn't lost his status with the brotherhood and the IAMS even transferred his pension to my account for the day I registered and acquired my own robot. We were provided for. Mr. Jay had been right. I didn't have to leave school after all. The problem solved itself and everything passed. In a way it had always been solved. Dad's stroke had pretty much killed him from the first, he just hadn't finished dying. There was some money from the brainshare Howard had set him up with and nobody said anything about it. In time we expect a settlement for Difty from CDR — they've lost most of their appeals. That meant I could go to almost any school I chose.

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I talked to Mom a couple of times about opting out of the local and going for a non-union school. At first she was uncomfortable, but I think she's coming around to it. It's become pretty obvious that I just don't have the right attitude to stay with a local. Belonging seems to mean having the proper set of prejudices.

Cliff only called once to say he was sorry.

Keith and Pete and Kyle and the others keep asking me if I want to get together with them again. They honestly don't seem to understand why I always say no. ☜

If Ellen thought falling stars were romantic,
Lou figured she'd melt for an impact crater demonstration.

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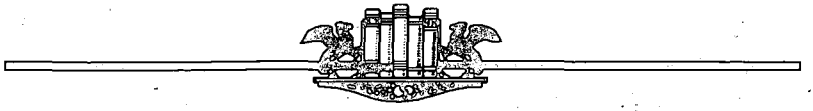

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

A Shortcut in Time, by Charles Dickinson, Forge Books, 2003, $24.95.

I'M A sucker for a good time travel book, especially when it plays fair and details all the anomalies as *part* of the story, rather than bogging it down with endless exposition. *A Shortcut in Time* is strong on both counts, catching my interest from the very beginning and never letting go.

This isn't Charles Dickinson's first book, but I was unfamiliar with his work before I started *A Shortcut in Time*. I could go into one of my usual apologias at this point, but frankly, there are so many good books being published that only the most dedicated of book review editors is familiar with them all, not to mention their authors. And no one has the time to read them all. So instead, I'll just plead my ignorance and crib from the promotional material that accompanied the book to let you know that Dickinson is a Chicago-area journalist and has had at least one previous novel, *The Widow's Adventures*.

I can't say how his previous books might have helped him, but his journalist's eye obviously knows how to find and then convey all the right details we need in terms of character, setting, and story, while his familiarity with reporting lends credibility to the various snippets of old newspaper articles that prove central to the plot at various times.

The novel centers around Josh Winkler, a rather unsuccessful artist and longtime resident of Euclid, Illinois, a town crisscrossed with shortcuts. It's on one of these well-known paths that cuts between the town's long blocks that Winkler stumbles upon the possibility of time travel. First he appears to have gone back fifteen minutes himself. Then a young woman appears who claims to be from the year 1908.

No one quite believes any of it,

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but the story gets out, and the local teenagers start exploring the possibilities. Before you know it there are some unexplained disappearances, with Winkler standing at the center of the mystery.

As I write the above, I realize that there's no way to capture the plot of Dickinson's novel without spoiling surprises, so I'm going to stop here. Instead, let me simply say that like Jack Finney, Alan Brennert, and other fine writers before him, Dickinson gives us a thoughtful, well-considered time travel story that focuses as much on the complex relationships of his characters as it does on the plot devices that drive the story.

You won't necessarily like everyone you meet in this book, and the way events unfold won't always be to your liking, but Dickinson plays true to both the characters and their story, and if you give the book a try, I doubt very much that you'll be disappointed.

And while we're on the subject of time travel, a couple of other books recently made their way into my P.O. box that are worth at least a mention:

Time Machines (Carroll & Graf, 2002, $13), edited by Bill Adler, Jr., is a wonderful collection of what the cover copy claims are "the best time travel stories ever written." I'm sure that you, like me, will question omissions of personal favorites (what, no Fritz Leiber?), but Adler has brought together enough high quality stories — many of them unfamiliar to me — to make up for them. And when you consider a line-up that includes everyone from Rudyard Kipling and Edgar Allan Poe to Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and Rod Serling, you know you're in good hands here.

For a more scholarly look at the subject, there's *Worlds Enough and Time* (Greenwood, 2002, $59.95), edited by Gary Westfahl, George Slusser, and David A. Leiby. The essays collected here explore time travel from as far back as Dante through to books and films that appeared in the 1990s. It's dry but fascinating reading, and certainly makes you want to track down the cited works, but considering its steep price, you might want to make sure that your local public library acquires a copy for you to borrow.

White and Other Tales of Ruin, by Tim Lebbon, Night Shade Books, 2002, $27/$15.

Ruin is the operative word in these six novellas, two of them new

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to this collection. Tim Lebbon writes about a world that is all too easy to imagine, showing us how easily we could lose all the advances we've made in terms of technology and social benefits. But he balances this bleakness with characters who persevere, even in situations that should leave them empty of all hope.

The title story (which deservedly won a British Fantasy Award) is a good example of how quickly everything can fall apart. Set in an old house in Cornwall on the coast of England, it's about a group of people cut off from the world by a sudden, deep snowfall. And the steady accumulation of snow remains an ongoing concern, because it doesn't let up. The drifts are so deep that one becomes exhausted traveling a few hundred meters, never mind the ten kilometers to the nearest village.

Before the power died, the characters watched reports on the television of thousands of people falling ill and dying from an inexplicable new disease; food riots in London; a nuclear exchange between Greece and Turkey. As the protagonist says, "We'd known something was coming — things had been falling apart for years — but once it began it was a cumulative effect, speeding from a steady trickle toward decline, to a raging torrent."

So when the snow first began to fall, they stayed where they were because it seemed they were better off, distanced from the rest of the world. Now, as the story opens, it's too late for them to leave. And worse, there's something out there in the snow, hungry for them. Something new and dangerous that they see only as ghostly shapes against the white snow. Then one by one, they begin to die.

It's a horrific story, but it doesn't read as horror. Lebbon has more of a mainstream touch with his prose — especially when it comes to his characterization — and his speculations feel like science fiction. In fact, what he writes is a hybrid of styles that mesh perfectly, playing on all our senses and sensibilities. One moment readers will feel the need to avert their eyes, the next they'll be caught up in the emotional undercurrents that pull the characters through the story. In another, they'll stop to consider the possible ramifications of not only what's happening in the world of the story, but how readily it could strike our own.

"White" alone is worth the price of admission, but Lebbon goes on to take us on five other journeys,

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each calling up a similar mix of emotions in his readers. It's a dark and bleak world he paints for us, but one that's impossible to ignore.

The Furies, by Mike Carey & John Bolton, Vertigo/DC, 2002, $24.95.

It's been three years since her son died, but Lyta Hall is still stumbling through a blur of grief that she tries to ease with one-night stands. Unfortunately, the meaningless sex in which she attempts to lose herself ends too often with her beating her partner senseless — and she has no idea why. Things just...set her off.

It's after a visit to the police station following the latest such incident that she becomes involved with a theater troupe on its way to a festival in Athens. Born in Greece, Hall still speaks the language. She accompanies the troupe to help facilitate their visit, and hopefully to put some distance between herself and the madness she can feel stalking the edges of her mind back home.

But once in Athens, things only get worse and Hall finds herself in Hades — literally — a pawn in a struggle between the gods of Olympus and the ancient Titans.

This is a powerful story of loss, vengeance, and redemption, rooted in the mythos that Neil Gaiman created with his stories of the Endless. Some familiarity with his *The Sandman* series (particularly the last two installments, *The Kindly Ones* and *The Wake*) will enrich your experience of the book in hand — or at least add a resonance to the events. As will a basic knowledge of Greek mythology. But neither is necessary as author Mike Carey does a fine job of explaining things on the fly without ever bogging the story down.

And what a story it is: dark and redolent in drama and mystery.

As for John Bolton's art, he returns here to that style of photo-realistic painting that worked so well in *Harlequin Valentine*, but eschewing the black outlining of the figures which I, at least, found somewhat distracting in that earlier book. He's also using a bold, rich palette here that fully realizes the larger-than-life struggle of the gods. This is nicely balanced by the more subdued palette utilized when the scenes are wholly in the human world.

Considering the glossy stock on which this is printed, and how beautiful the art looks on it, the $24.95 cover price is certainly fair.

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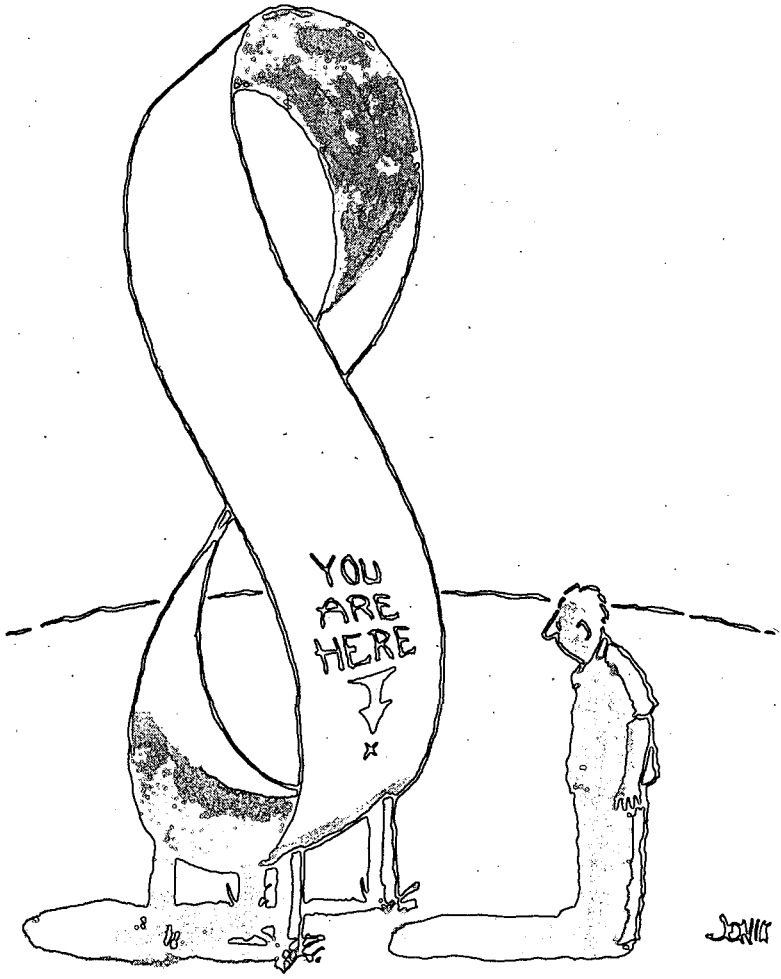
But those on a more limited budget might want to wait for the inevitable trade paperback that might even be available by the time this review sees print.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



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Musing on Books

Michelle West

The Angel Factory, by Terence Blacker, Simon & Schuster, 2002, $16.95.

Heir Apparent, by Vivian Vande Velde, Harcourt, 2002, $17.

The Sword of the Rightful King, by Jane Yolen, Harcourt, 2003, $17.

I HAVE suffered with this column from an embarrassment of riches. Every so often, I like to read genre fiction aimed at younger audiences. Sometimes, as I've said before, I like these books because they cut to the heart — both of the matter, and of the person I once was (and can't often be anymore). But this time, my life is momentarily running on what passes for an even keel in this house, and I didn't read for comfort or escape, but rather for pure pleasure. A luxury.

What was more of a luxury was the number of books that I picked up and actually read cover to cover. As reading often takes a back seat to everything else — and this is something to cry over — I tend not to finish things that don't hold my attention. In most cases, I blame my attention. Although I couldn't give each book the attention it deserved, let me quickly mention other titles that you might want to seek out: *Hannah's Garden*, by Midori Snyder, a lovely blending of this world and an older, wilder one; *Stravaganza City of Masks*, by Mary Hoffman, a thoroughly odd fantasy about a terminally ill young boy and the fantasy which makes his dying bearable — a fantasy that happens to be real; *Thorn Ogres of Hagwood*, by Robin Jarvis, in which small and humble werlings face a battle far beyond their abilities, and manage to succeed — at great cost; *The Bagpiper's Ghost*, the third in the Tartan Magic series by Jane Yolen, a more traditional contemporary YA about a family visiting Scotland and what they encounter there (the first two books, *The*

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Wizard's Map and *The Pictish Child*, are also a lot of fun); *The Wizard Alone*, by Diane Duane, a book that blends autism with magic in perhaps my favorite of Duane's series; and the thoroughly charming *Great Ghost Rescue* by Eva Ibbotson.

Let me start with an author I'm completely unfamiliar with. Terence Blacker has, according to the promotional material that came with *The Angel Factory*, written a number of books — and I now plan to seek out *Homebird* and the others.

This novel is told from the viewpoint of one Thomas Wisdom, a boy who is cursed with a perfect family. His parents are kind, generous, and lacking in the social infelicities that often populate YA novels — they're reasonable, they're not abusive, they're not quirky. Pale-skinned, blond, tall, and slender, they project the aura of the idealized happy family — both outside of the house and inside it. Thomas has a sister, a budding genius named Amy whose new boyfriend Luke is a keeper. His parents have each other, and Thomas has them all.

Outside of his family, he has a friend — Gip Sanchez, sometimes known as Gary — who is the antithesis of the Wisdom family: fatherless and burdened with an alcoholic mother who usually can't be bothered to give him the time of day, he is also burdened with a short leg and the awkward gait that comes of it. He's a loner, immersed in the virtual universe, and he doesn't much seem to care if he's treated with suspicion or contempt. Thomas has always liked him, although half the time he's not sure if it's *because* Gip is on the opposite pole of the world the Wisdom family also inhabits.

But one day, while Thomas is feeling a bit down, he tells Gip that there's just something too strange about his perfect family, and Gip takes it into his head that *no* family can be as perfect as Thomas's. His parents, Gip theorizes, must be CIA agents. Forgetting just how tenacious Gip can be, Thomas finds himself letting Gip into the house, and from there, onto his parent's computer. What he finds — encrypted — is the first of many things to shake Thomas's life completely. Gip's not enough of a genius to be able to decode the document; he takes it to Mr. Rendle, often called The Beast, and Mr. Rendle finally solves the puzzle.

Thomas, it seems, is adopted.

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That would be fine — but Thomas's parents are *not* the people he thought they were; they're something entirely different; something not entirely human. In fact, they're Angels. And they're part of a plan to save the world.

In other hands, this might be trite or humorous, but Blacker's deceptively simple narrative lifts it into a different realm. Thomas Wisdom's voice is as true a voice as you find in fiction; angry, alienated, standing on the uncomfortable edge of puberty — a position that makes us all reevaluate our lives. If he has more to deal with — and he does — it's not glossed over; he goes through rage and fear, pain and hope, the desire for a place and a position of his own, all accentuated by the strangeness of a life he thought he knew. The story deals with the inadequacy felt by someone who isn't as confident or certain as the people he's come to trust — and we've all been there.

This is a book about good and evil, or rather, about good and the muddled, muddied state in which most of us end up living; it's about the relationship between family and friends, and the way it shifts with experience; it's about the past that you know and the past that you need to know to move forward. It's about having to make a choice that affects not only you, but everything you've come to love and hate.

And it's also a compelling mystery in its own right; I couldn't put it down.

Heir Apparent, by Vivian Vande Velde, is a near-future sf novel that feels a lot like a contemporary. Giannine is fourteen — exactly fourteen, given that it's the grim occasion of yet another birthday — and she is living with her grandmother; her mother and father have busy and successful lives that include holidays and other than that, little time for her. On her birthday, her father's secretary phoned to ask her what she would like, and Giannine chose a gift certificate to Rasmussem Enterprises Gaming. And wouldn't you know it? On this particular day, there's a picket line in front of the building. It seems that CPOC, Citizens to Protect Our Children, has decided that far too much time is spent on the dangerous pastime of fantasy gaming. Giannine manages to avoid the pickets (barely) in order to redeem her birthday present.

First, I have to mention that the book itself is dedicated to people whom the author clearly finds wrong-headed — namely, people

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who want to protect our children from the dangerous influence of fantasy — and this fact says a lot about the author.

Second, it's clear from reading this book that Vivian Vande Velde either spent enormous amounts of her youth in front of a terminal typing directions at a game called ZORK — a game with no useful save function (as in, you can save the game, but if you die, you have to start it all over again from the beginning); although she creates a gaming environment that is totally immersive, it's clear that she played a lot before gaming companies decided to show a *little* mercy.

Third, Giannine chooses, for her thirty minutes of free time, a game called Heir Apparent, in which your choices determine your success, and there's no right way to win — but an awful lot of unfortunate ways to lose. The King is dead, and he's decided to make the bastard child of a dead servant the next King, bypassing his understandably ticked off former wife and her three legitimate sons. And all of them are happily ruthless.

This is all very fine, but while Giannine is immersed in her session, some of the more radical CPOC elements decide to take matters into their own hands, and they destroy some key equipment. And when you're neurologically hooked up to that equipment, it changes the nature of the game.

You see, Giannine — dubbed Janine in gaming context, and Princess Janine, the girl who used to raise sheep, no less — is now racing to finish this game because it's the only safe way out of the net. Brains overload, and without some of the equipment that was destroyed, there's no safe way to pull her out of session without causing damage. Unfortunately, there's no safe way to let her *stay* there either; she has a lot less time to finish the game than she'd like — or than she needs — and finishing it successfully will save her life, but it's the *only* thing that will.

Which tells you pretty much exactly what the book is *about* but gives you none of the feel of it. Vande Velde has a keen eye and a knack for really humorous turns of phrase that makes the endless iterations that Giannine has to go through — and believe me, she's not a gaming genius, so she dies a *lot* — a perverse delight. Her difficulty with her absentee parents very nearly kills her for real (it certainly causes quite a few deaths before she figures this out), rooting the character firmly in context.

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I've read a lot of fiction that deals with immersive gaming, but none of them have approached it from this particular angle: Giannine has to learn from her mistakes, and because she makes so many of them, by the end of the book, she's pretty much figured out what she has to do. And even then, there's a very real chance that she'll blow it; having seen her do it so often, there's that element of suspense that doesn't quite let up.

Vande Velde takes a few happy swings at the politically correct, and a few more at corporate branding, without in any way preaching; she's a gem and this book really is one that will appeal to readers of all ages, especially those who were tormented by their fascination with Infocom games. And, although it's not strictly relevant, I really liked the cover.

But a word of warning: If you don't like to laugh out loud in the company of strangers, *don't* read this book in public.

Last, but definitely not least, is Jane Yolen's *Sword of the Rightful King*, subtitled *A Novel of King Arthur*.

Let me say up front that there are very, very few Arthurians that will not put me into a somnambulant state. I already *know* the story, thank you very much, and having read the first two Mary Stewart novels *(The Crystal Cave* and *The Hollow Hills)*, I often feel that there's nothing more than can, or need, be said.

But this is *Jane Yolen* and her take on everything is always interesting; Arthur is no exception.

Of the three books I'm reviewing this month, this is the only one that isn't written in first person, and of the three, it is also the only one that is written from multiple viewpoints: that of Gawaine, a Knight of Arthur's court, that of Gawen, a young boy who has come to the Court seeking justice — or revenge — for said Knight's mistreatment of his sister, and that of Merlin himself, or Merlinnus, as he is named here. Yolen's prose is, as always, graceful and lean but never flat.

As the title indicates, the book revolves around the Sword in the Stone, and although Yolen doesn't choose to strip magic from her tale — there's plenty of it in evidence — she does demystify the Sword and the reasons for its existence. But she does so without harming the legend and without the loss of the mythic element, which is no mean feat.

Gawaine's mother is the villain

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of the piece. She has Gawaine and his brothers wrapped around her fingers, and those fingers are curved like claws, and about as gentle. She sends them all to Arthur's court with intent to relieve Arthur of the crown to which he has the lesser claim.

But Gawaine *is* a loyal Knight, and he — as do all of Arthur's Knights — admires, respects, and serves. The charisma of Arthur is shown through Gawaine's difficult younger brother, because Arthur is able to reach what Gawaine himself can't.

At this same time, Gawen comes to Court and meets Merlinnus. Merlinnus is accustomed to either fear or awe as a usual greeting, and as Gawen shows neither, and also seems to know a smattering of Latin, the old mage is intrigued enough to take him in as a servant.

And it's as a servant that Gawen sees what Arthur is, and helps to ensure that Arthur becomes King of all Britain.

The book ends far before the tragedy for which the Arthurian mythos is now best known — but some element of it shadows the figure of Lancelot — a man whom Yolen mentions two or three times, always to haunting effect. There is something incredibly moving about his attempt to pull the Sword from the stone, and her description of his "ruined angel face" will stay with me for some time.

But there are surprises along the way, none of which I will ruin here; enough certainly to make the return to Arthurian pastures a very happy voyage.

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The Dog Movie

By Albert E. Cowdrey

"SO," SAID DETECTIVE SGT. Schmidt to Detective Dorsey. "I seen your report on that Cavallo thing. It was short and sweet. Anyway, it was short."

Dorsey raised his eyebrows. "So watchoo wanna know?"

Schmidt thoughtfully swallowed a mouthful of Abita Amber beer. In midafternoon Ya Mama's Bar & Grill, otherwise known as Cop Heaven, was quiet; Pete the bartender was polishing glasses; muted laughter emerged from the kitchen where somebody was chopping onions.

Schmidt said, "I like to know what really happened."

They exchanged a brief shifty glance, like two button-eyed strays meeting in an alley that was home ground to neither.

Dorsey mouthed his own beer and said, "Nothin' I could put in no report. You won't believe it neither."

"Try me."

Dorsey sighed. "You know anything about that neighborhood out by Fig Street?"

"No."

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"Well, it's old fashioned. Lots of little houses, yards with sunflowers. One choich, Saint Michael the Archangel. Plenty old folks, not many young ones. Mostly poor, but some people like Mr. Cavallo own their own cottages. He had a big dog name of Ice. When the crimes started, people said, 'Won't nobody bother Mr. C. He got him a serious dog.' But they were wrong."

I got involved (said Dorsey, waving at Pete for another beer) when a string of neighborhood robberies begun to look like a pattern. Some bastard was targeting the seniors. Busting into their houses after midnight, beating them, stealing their stuff.

He raped a seventy-six-year-old woman. She told the interviewer from Sex Crimes that he wore a stocking mask and dark clothes and gloves and she wouldn't reckanize him again. Even as rapists go the perpetrator was rough, and she almost bled to death.

I went back over the crime scenes and of course the guys had done the usual stuff, dusting for prints and so on, but the perp was smart, he never left nothing behind they could find. Couldn't even get his semen from the rape victim — guy had slipped on a rubber before he did the dirty deed.

I talked to the members of the Fig Street Improvement Association, and all I found out was they were Olympic-class gossippers. Lot of talk, no real facts. So I begun going from door to door — community po-leecing, you know? One evening I went to see Cavallo, among others, and he invited me in.

We sat down in his living room. The walls were covered with a kind of yellowish-brownish paper. One old lamp didn't put out much light, but sure made lots of shadows. The room smelled like the armoire where my grammaw used to keep her clothes. The TV had rabbit ears instead of a cable connection, and Cavallo had added a wire coathanger to improve reception. Over the mantel was a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a photo of Cavallo's dead wife, Margaret, plus a couple of stuffed ducks.

He had square shoulders and big hands, so I could see he'd been a strong guy when he was younger. His dog Ice was laying beside the old man's chair. Nothing but a mutt, a New Orleans fence-jumper, but he had lots of Catahoula hound in him — whitish-brownish fur and eyes that were pale pale blue, almost silver. Probably a hell of a hunter when he was

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young; I could see him bringing in those ducks. He raised his great big head and checked me out, and then laid it down again. He was a lot like Cavallo, a strong animal that had seen better days.

Cavallo let one arm hang over the arm of the chair and stroked his fur with the tips of his fingers while we talked, and Ice gave a very lazy wag to his tail, like *thump, thump*. It was a dry, cool kind of evening, lots of 'lectricity in everything, and now and then a little spark would jump from the dog's fur to his fingers.

I ascertained that Cavallo didn't know nothing useful about the crimes, so I went right into my spiel — use caution, check the door locks and so on, and he listened politely and said he had always taken care of himself and expected to keep on doing so. He showed me around the house, just four rooms, kitchen and bath, and every one except the bathroom was full of statues of saints. There was the Little Flower, St. Rita, St. Christopher, St. Expedite, St. Joseph, and Christ only knows what else. Wherever you turned, there was eyes looking at you. You mind if I smoke?

Schmidt shrugged. "Be my guest."

While Dorsey lit up a cigarillo, Schmidt pulled a big stinky black pipe out of his own pocket. They were sitting under a sign that said THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING, but they were cops and used to ignoring signs and Pete the bartender, who knew them well, ignored their ignoring.

After sucking on his pipe, Schmidt said, "Them saints, you know — Eyetalians are like that. My wife's Eyetalian and all her family are, too. Out on her Dad's front lawn there's an old bathtub standing on end with a Voigin inside of it. The house is likewise — everywhere you look, statchoos and pitchers. Her Mama give her an Infant Jesus of Prague for our bedroom and every time we screw, I gotta cover him up with my shoit."

He grunted an apology ("Didn't mean to interrupt"), and Dorsey nodded and went on:

My main interest was whether the house was secure, and of course it wasn't. No alarm system, and old sash windows with catches a child could open. The doors had no deadlocks, just ordinary locks, and the doors were hollow, too, the kind ought to be sold under the trademark *The Burglar's Friend*.

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We stepped into the back yard and ducked under some laundry hanging on a wire clothesline — Cavallo explained that his drier had gone on the blink three or four years ago, and he'd never gotten around to having it fixed — and I could see the yard was wide open to an alley. Anybody could walk up the alley out of sight of the street and step into the back yard and open that hollow door with one good kick.

We went back to the living room and sat down and discussed the problem. Cavallo was in his same chair, and it had taken his shape like a mold, and he was stroking Ice the same way as before, and I wondered how many days and nights those two had spent like that.

I told the old man what I thought about his house, and I also mentioned some things I'd heard when I was walking around the neighborhood. Like, Cavallo didn't believe in credit cards and paid for everything with cash, so he must keep a bunch of it at home. Word had gotten around. I told him frankly that I thought his house was a crime scene waiting to happen. But he just smiled, kind of superior, like he knew something I didn't, and said:

"I don't think I'm in danger. I got Ice here, and I'll tell you something, Dorsey" — we'd gotten kind of chummy by then — "my wife, she knows all the saints. She's met them all since she died, and she's told me they'll protect me."

I said, "She *told* you that? How?"

"The television set," he said, pointing. "Sometimes she talks to me through it."

Well, what do you say to a seemingly intelligent guy tells you something like that? I thought maybe Cavallo'd seen *Poltergeist* and got confused about what was real and what wasn't. I left him sitting there in his little old house, with his little old TV, and his big old dog, and a couple dozen saints, and I figured I'd be coming back there, more likely sooner than later.

However, when the perp struck again it was about two and a half blocks away. He broke into a house belonging to an elderly couple, beat them so bad the lady was in a coma for a week, robbed them and only just missed burning the house down with them in it because some neighbors heard the commotion and called the cops and the firemen, who put it out before it really got started.

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The newspaper started screaming about a crime wave, and for once it had every right to. The superintendent, he set up a task force and called a meeting at Headquarters. We spent a couple hours listening to a bunch of bozos saying how the perp had low self-esteem and an immature sex life and how he was targeting parental figures and had probably been abused in childhood. As if anybody gave a shit — all I wanted to do was abuse him some more.

Finally one of the experts stated the obvious, that each crime was worse than the one before, and there was like a cresh — crest — um —

"Crescendo?" Schmidt asked.

YEAH, RIGHT. A crescendo was like building up and you could see what it was building up to. And the crimes were coming closer together, too. Just three nights later the perp entered Cavallo's back yard exackly the way I said he would. He had a twenty-four-inch blue-steel wrecking bar and went through that hollow back door in roughly ten seconds. The old dog, Ice, jumped him and the guy beat the dog to death there in Cavallo's kitchen.

Well, all the noise, the dog barking and growling and then screaming, brought an avalanche of 911 calls. A car got there within five minutes, then a bunch more showed up, and even a SWAT team was sent by HQ because of a mistaken report that the perp had been cornered in the house. Actually, the sumbitch'd got away again — only this time he got away with nothing but his skin. And he left plenty behind.

First of all, Ice had put up a good fight before dying, and we got from his mouth a torn glove that was soaked with what turned out to be human blood. So we got the perp's DNA, only this goddamn backward State of Louisiana don't have a DNA registry of felons yet, so we didn't have nothing to compare it with. Then we got something better. He'd dropped his wrecking bar and because he'd lost his glove we were able to recover prints from it — good clear bloody prints on the steel.

"So," said Schmidt, nodding his satisfaction like a big bird drinking, "who was the mutha?"

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"His name was Steven Mark Bozeman. One of these characters like Manson, the usual background, junkie mama, string of foster homes, started his jail experience as a child and over time turned into a totally institutional man, at home only in prisons, where he shoulda stayed. A seriously mean sumbitch. He was twenty-eight, with a rap sheet six feet long, and crime against seniors was kind of like a theme of his career."

"Why was he out of prison?" asked Schmidt.

"Because his last conviction, the prosecutor didn't think the cops had found enough evidence to convict and so he planted some evidence on Bozeman. Then it all come out and he was set free."

Schmidt grunted, "So what happened then?"

"Something I never expected."

"Cavallo started taking precautions at last?"

"Nuh uh. He started taking fewer precautions than before."

I paid my second visit to his house (Dorsey went on) on the afternoon of the day after all the excitement.

The old man had already buried Ice in the garden; he insisted on taking me out back to see the grave, and we ducked under the clothesline like before and walked to a fair-sized pile of fresh dirt with a garden spade standing up on it.

"Think I'll plant firethorn here," he said. "Every time a thorn sticks me I'll think about him."

We returned to the house, and I noticed that Cavallo didn't even bother to push the busted back door to. I urged him to get it fixed pronto, but he only said, "I will later."

I couldn't make him out. Old guy like that — hell, any guy — after what had happened the night before, he ought to have been shaky, swallowing tranquillizers, crying over his dog — I don't know. *Something*. Cavallo was looking somber, I guess the word is, but he was calm. His eyes were kind of distant was all. I said he was taking it good, but maybe he should watch out for delayed shock. He shook his head.

"Margaret talked to me last night," he said, gesturing at the TV. "She told me Ice's over on that side now. The saints, they've got a special job for him."

I said, "Well, that's nice, I guess."

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He said, "Yeah, they're all over there except me, and that's why I'm not afraid."

I began to get the idea. Ice had been his last connection on this side, you might say. Now he was gone, and Cavallo wanted to go too, and that was why he wasn't locking up or anything. You hear about people committing suicide by cop, but I figured this guy was planning suicide by robber.

So I tried to brace him up. Reminded him the kind of things Bozeman had done to people he knew, and also to Ice. Asked if he wanted to make things any easier for a piece of shit like that.

He said, "I won't make things easier for him," and that was all I could get out of him.

Well, I try not to worry about people, you go nuts that way, but Mr. Cavallo sort of reminded me of my own old man in his last days. Sitting alone in an empty house, frying himself an occasional egg when he got hungry, hanging out his own wash, and waiting to die.

My old man never talked to Mama through a TV set, but every once in a while when I used to visit him, he'd say suddenly, "Check and see if your Mama's come back from the mall. I thought I heard her in the bedroom." I'd have to say, "Pop, she's been dead for five years," and he'd kind of blink and say, "Oh yeah. I remember now."

So I took to dropping in on Cavallo. I badgered him into getting the busted door fixed, but then he'd forget to lock it. Or say he forgot. When the weather turned hot he'd sit with a fan on and the windows wide open to catch a breeze, so I brought him an old window unit A/C I had in my garage and plugged it in for him. He bitched about that, said it gave him sinus headaches, you know how old people are, but all the same he got used to being cool and dry when the air outside was like a pile of wet socks. And of course now the house could be shut up tight.

We kind of got to be friends, even had a beer now and then. I heard a lot more about the saints, and they sounded like the Fig Street Improvement Association. Margaret told him the Little Flower was a snip, and St. Rita meant well, but was terribly nosy. The Pope was wrong about St. Christopher, he really did exist, and the Vatican taking him off the Calendar of Saints made him real unhappy. St. Joseph had been hard to get to know, but she managed it at last, and he told her that he and Mary had

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six kids, Jesus being the oldest, and where did that hooey about her being a virgin come from, anyway?

Well, a month went by with no more crimes, and I began to think maybe the perp had moved on.

One evening I dropped by on my way home, just to say hello, and Cavallo was sitting in his nice cool living room in his usual chair, with one old lamp in the middle of one little puddle of light, and all the rest in shadows. We talked about this and that and he asked if we'd had any luck finding Bozeman, and I said no, we'd had some leads but they all petered out. Maybe he'd left town. Cavallo shook his head.

"No," he said, "he's still around."

By now I knew him pretty well, so I said, "Margaret tell you that?"

He nodded. "She says he'll be coming back here. He needs money to run on and he figures I've got some hidden around the house."

"So, do you?"

He didn't answer. That was his way when I got too nosy about his life. He didn't tell me to butt out, he just closed his mouth and didn't say nothing at all.

I can see him now, sitting there with his right arm hanging over the side of the chair as usual. All at once I realized he was automatically moving his hand, like he used to when Ice would lie there to have his back scratched. And then I heard a soft *thump thump*. I stared, and something was laying in the shadow beside the chair. The shadow was too — I don't know. Rounded, like. It wasn't exactly the shadow of the chair.

I stared at it, forgetting to breathe, and suddenly a little spark jumped to Cavallo's fingertips.

Schmidt was staring too.

"You crazy as hell," he declared, adding at once, "No insult intended."

Dorsey nodded. "You see why I left some stuff outta my report. If I put something like that in, I'd either be laying on the couch of some tame shrink or else riding a scooter through the Desire Housing Project. All depending on whether they decided I was going nuts or trying to be funny."

"But," Schmidt argued uneasily, "say you did see something like a spark, who knows what it was? It probably wasn't nothing after all."

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"No," said Dorsey, "it was something real. You know how I know? Because the next time I saw Cavallo, it was the morning he called me to say there was a dead man in his back yard."

BOZEMAN (Dorsey said) was there, hanging on the wire clothesline. He must have been running like mad when he hit it, because it had practically taken his head off.

The coroner's report later said it had cut clean through the trachea and when he sank down the weight of his body had driven it up behind his lower jaw. His mouth was open and his eyes were bugging out and the pupils were dilated and looked like they were painted on eggs with stove paint. A uniform cop come in with me, a young guy. He looked Bozeman right in the face and then went over by the fence and puked.

Bozeman wasn't wearing his usual stocking mask, and he had a Saturday night special in his pocket, so I think he intended to kill Cavallo after robbing him. The crimes had been getting more and more violent, so murder was logically next on the list. The ground was damp from a shower the day before, and the only tracks were his. Toes deep, in fact mostly no heelmarks at all, so he was running hard, not that I needed anybody to tell me that.

The question was, what was chasing him?

"Whoa," said Schmidt. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. You don't believe that, right? You just puttin' me on, right?"

Dorsey smiled. "You know what I said at first? You wouldn't believe me. And you said, Try me. So I have. And you don't believe me."

"Nobody would," said Schmidt, signaling for another beer. "That's the insanest notion I've listened to since the last time I seen the Louisiana Legislature in session."

"Wait," said Dorsey, continuing to smile. "There's more."

I checked the back door (he went on), and it wasn't busted. It had been left unlocked, probably to lure Bozeman in. Some uniform cops were standing around inside with their thumbs up their asses, waiting for somebody to tell them what to do. I asked where Mr. Cavallo was.

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Oh, they said, he's in the front room sleeping. Old guy's all tuckered out from the excitement.

I went into the living room, and it was just like before, except it was daytime. The light was off and no dark shadows, but the yellow-brown wallpaper was the same, and the smell like the inside of an armoire full of old, clean, folded clothes. Cavallo was dressed in PJ's and a terrycloth robe and ratty felt slippers. He was sitting on the couch with his head thrown back and he wasn't breathing. For a second I thought he was dead, but then he kind of snorted and his chest started to move again.

I was just about to wake him up when I noticed that the TV was on. It was running an old black-and-white movie, what my twelve-year-old son calls dog movies, because dogs can't see color, you know. A guy was running through knee-deep mist, and at first I thought it was an old-time horror movie and pretty soon Lon Chaney, Jr., would lope into view wearing a faceful of fur.

The camera work was sort of Blair Witch style, going up and down, side to side, so that sometimes the running man was out of focus. It was well done, too, because without anything being said or any sound at all, you knew the tracker was following his prey by the scent trail, losing it, picking it up again. Little by little the distance shrunk, and the running guy turned and stared over his shoulder. His jaw was dangling and his eyes were bugging out, and it was the same face I'd just seen hanging over the clothesline in Cavallo's back yard.

I don't know how long I stood there, kind of paralyzed, looking at that. Whatever was tracking him got closer and closer, and he looked over his shoulder twice more. And yeah, it was Bozeman, and he was dying, dying from fear, running and stumbling and gasping and dying. But never falling — no rest for the wicked. And then the picture flickered and dimmed and went out.

"Good morning," said Cavallo, and I turned around. He was awake, rubbing his eyes.

I asked him, "Pleasant dreams?"

And he said, "Yeah. I had a real nice dream."

I pointed at the TV and said, "How long you think that hunt'll go on?"

He said, "Margaret says forever. And the saints told her, so it's probably true."

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Schmidt finished his last beer. His eyes avoided Dorsey's.

"So watchoo think, I'm nuts?" asked Dorsey, somewhat urgently, as if he had doubts himself.

"Maybe. Maybe not. How's life on Fig Street these days?"

"Real quiet. Cavallo had this condition — apnea, they call it — where you stop breathing in your sleep. Well, one night about six months after Bozeman's death, he stopped and didn't start again. Some young folks bought his place, as a starter house, you know. They're fixing it up real nice. Life goes on."

"So does death," said Det. Sgt. Schmidt, rising. "We better get back to headquarters." He added, "I hope to Christ you ain't told this story to nobody else but me."

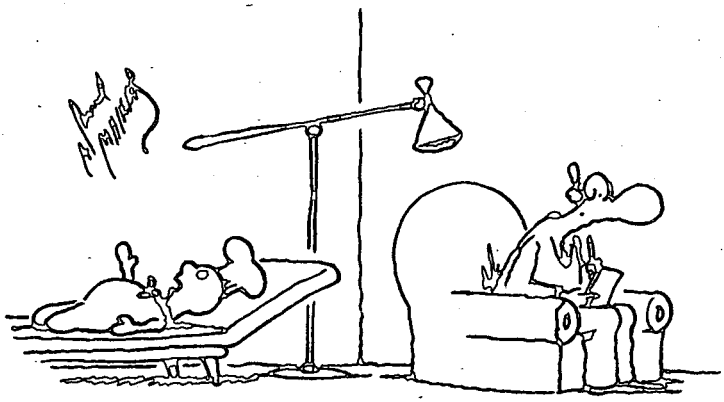
"Whatchoo think, I'm nuts?"

"You asked me that before," said Schmidt.

They paid Pete for the beers, and as they were leaving Ya Mama's, crowding each other in the doorway — both men were built on the general plan of a side of beef — Dorsey added, "Cavallo left me his TV set in his will."

"You tried playing it yet?"

"You *do* think I'm nuts," said Dorsey glumly, and they set off, back to Headquarters.



"My girlfriend dumped me for some guy without hydrogenated oils."

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At a writers' conference in New Mexico, your editor met a poet whose first response to the words "science fiction" was to say, "The thing of it is, either they come to us or we go to them." (Perhaps this poet greets mystery writers by saying, "Either the villains get away or the cops get 'em."!) We haven't run many alien invasion stories recently, but Mr. Sheckley's take on the subject seems like a fresh one. What would the aforementioned poet make of it? More to the point, what do you think?

Legend of Conquistadors

By Robert Sheckley

EARTH CB122XA IS ONE OF the alternate Earths spilling out of the matrix of quantum mechanical points of possibility that make up this part of the multiverse. They do things differently here.

Earth CB122XA, or "Earth," as the locals called it, was a quiet place. A single king ruled the entire planet. It had its cyclones, floods, forest fires, and its plagues and epidemics, just like most of the other Earths. But these came in moderation, especially when compared with elsewhere.

And, just as their people and planets and conditions of Earth came out of the cosmic foam, so did their gods.

This Earth had its own god, generated out of the endless quantum-mechanical possibilities. The locals called him "God." He didn't involve himself in the day-to-day workings of the planet or its people. He preferred not to work miracles, considering them a cheap effect. This god liked to see his people work out things for themselves. But sometimes, when an important point was at issue, or when the life of

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the entire planet hung in the balance, he had been known to give a hint or two.

This Earth, like all the others, was prone to accidents. Accidents often have forewarnings, but this one had none, unless you count the two spaceships that appeared seemingly from out of nowhere, circled the planet as though they were doing a survey, and then vanished again into space. This Earth, although it was a fairly advanced technological civilization, had no spaceships to send up to find out what the strangers wanted. There was some speculation as to why they had not responded to Earth's signals, but not much, because only a few people had seen them, and their accounts were not generally believed.

All too soon, the ships were back, and they led a fleet of spaceships into the skies of Earth. These ships were large and fully armed, and the people of Earth did not try to oppose them, but waited to see what they would do. To wait was also the decision of Drax, the king of Earth at that time.

The spaceships took up position above Earth's capital city, which was a place of architectural merit with many green spaces. At last a single huge ship came down and landed on the lawn of the king's palace.

Drax said to his court officials, "I guess I'd better see what they want."

He walked out alone to the ship.

After a while a port in the spaceship opened. A group of men marched out. They were tall, broad, ferocious-looking men, wearing battle armor. After them came a single man, larger than the others, dressed in golden armor.

He was taller than his guards by half a head, and proportionately broader. He carried his massive golden armor lightly. He wore metal belts from which hung an assortment of weapons, each more terrifying-looking than the one before. In one hand he carried a mace with a massy head, around which were mounted razor-sharp blades.

King Drax walked up to him and bowed. The golden warrior inclined his head slightly. They sized one another up for a moment.

At last the alien leader spoke. "I am Eduardo. I am the king of this several-million-man army that I have brought to your planet."

"And I am Drax," Drax said. "I am the king of this planet we call Earth. I welcome you. I am amazed to hear you speak our language."

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"Universal translating machinery is one of the few things we have retained from our planet's old science. It enables us to give orders to our subject people without having to sully our mouths with their debased languages."

"It's obviously a useful accomplishment," Drax said. "Have you many subject people?"

"Every race we have encountered is now subject to us. Except for the few who preferred to die to the last man."

"Our god would not approve of that," said Drax. "He is not in favor of war. He advises us to go on living by any means possible, and at any price."

"He sounds like a wise god. Let's get down to business. How do you feel about fighting me here and now in single combat for the whole works?" His gesture seemed to encompass the entire Earth.

Drax looked at the armed man more than twice his size and smiled. "I'd rather not," he said.

Eduardo nodded as if he had anticipated that answer. "Then what about if my army fights yours?"

"We haven't fought a war in over a thousand years," said Drax. "I don't think we'd make a very good showing. Have you another alternative?"

Eduardo looked him up and down and said, "If you think being unarmed and insignificant is going to keep me from killing you, you are mistaken."

"Why should there be any killing at all?" asked Drax.

"It's usual," Eduardo said, "when one king wants to take over the territory of another king."

"Do you really want to be king of this planet so badly that you'd kill for it? Don't bother. The planet's yours."

"This is anticlimactic," said Eduardo. "We're accustomed to at least token resistance."

"You won't find it here," Drax said. "You're going to rule this planet no matter what I say or do. So take it, it's yours."

"All right," Eduardo said. He had seen total capitulation before. "The first thing I'll need is a palace. I have to change my armor, issue some orders, put up my guard, and get some lunch."

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"My palace is yours," Drax said. "I'll move into a hotel in town."

"You're pretty cool about all this," Eduardo said. "I've got a notion to kill you right here and now, and rid myself of your deviousness."

"You'll do as you wish," Drax said. "But I assure you, I'm not devious. My god tells me the new king must be served. I obey. I would be useful to you in getting your orders transmitted to my people and obeyed properly."

"My dear fellow, why should I trust you?"

"Because I will always be under your eyes and in your hands. If I displease you, you can kill me out of hand at any moment."

"That's true," Eduardo said. "Okay. I'll need to go to my palace and get out a few orders."

"My palace is your palace," Drax said.

King Eduardo had a lot of work to do. He got all his soldiers places to live. This took several days. After those chores were done, Eduardo called for Drax and said, "Okay, now what?"

"Your majesty has been working very hard," Drax said. "Might it not be time for a little entertainment?"

"You know, Drax, I've never met anyone like you. Other kings, when I come to take over their planet, fight me to their last man. That's noble. I applaud noble men like that. But what do you do? You turn over everything to me without a fight. Why are you doing this, Drax?"

"This is what my god has instructed me to do."

"Must be quite a god, to advise you to give in without a struggle, and to hand over what you are asked for."

"Our god has served us well," Drax said.

"Well, I think it's time we got some girls in here."

"As you wish," Drax said. "They'll start arriving by tomorrow."

"I'll want all the finest looking women in the kingdom."

"You'll get them."

"And let your wife be among them."

After a short silence, Drax said, "It shall be as you say."

Eduardo sneered at him. "You really are a weak son of a bitch!"

"What would you do if I said you couldn't have her?"

"Kill you and take her anyway."

"Take her anyway, but don't kill me."

"So you can live to fight another day?"

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"So I can live."

"And I believe you have two nubile daughters, too."

"That is correct."

"I'll have them, too. They'll be serving girls at our feasts."

Drax turned pale, but he nodded. "Yours is the power to take what you want."

AND SO THE FEASTS and the merrymaking began among the invaders. Eduardo's troops were quartered in every city of any size on the planet. Eduardo decreed month-long celebrations, and the most beautiful women were forced to attend. The invaders were in a very good mood. They considered this a time of national degradation for Drax's people, and this pleased them.

Eduardo's next decision was to consider the people of Earth a population of untouchables — except that they were very touchable by the overclass. The Earth people were ordered to refer to themselves as The Underclass. The invaders thought that was very funny, and ignoble in the extreme.

Eduardo was amazed that Drax could bring himself to accept this. He asked him, "How can you bear such an insult?"

"My god told me it's my job to bear insults."

The king and his people quickly got used to bowing and scraping before Eduardo and his warriors. It was a big change but they handled it with little difficulty.

The invaders tasted the pleasures of the Earth and found them good. They quickly accustomed themselves to the soft and delicious foods that the underclass prepared so well. They grew used to exquisite women, which the Earth had so bounteously. And to the exquisite boys, for those whose tastes ran that way. They grew to love the great wines of Earth.

And then they learned about the great drugs.

This Earth was exceptionally well-stocked with drugs. And they were all stored in the temples that abounded on every continent, and proliferated in every city.

In the culture of Earth, drugs were used only as gifts to the gods.

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Consequently great quantities of them had piled up in the temple storerooms, neatly labeled, wrapped, or bagged or barreled. Ready to go. There was ancient hashish that had mellowed and intensified for months, for years. There were potent psychedelic mushrooms. There were all of the subtle preparations of the opium poppy. There were marijuanas so potent that the mere nimbus of their scent was enough to intoxicate a man.

Eduardo was in a high good old spirit when he asked Drax to visit him again, this time in his private chamber, which once had been Drax's private chamber. There was the carved green jade vase, the antique red turkey rug, and the yellow damask couch on which Drax and his wife had reclined in happier days. But it was too painful to think about. Drax put it out of his mind, remembering one of his god's more resonant sayings: "How easy it is for bad memories to come upon a person unawares. To forget such memories is difficult, but one who is assiduous toward his own salvation will acquire the knack, if for no other reason than to maintain his present happiness."

Eduardo appeared in good spirits; his sallow cheeks were flushed, and a hectic light was burning in his dark eyes.

"So, leader of the underclass," Eduardo called out, "you see me in an elevated mood. Life is good, my dear ex-king."

"I agree, and my god agrees, too."

"I think I know what you're trying to do, you sly dog. You expect me and my men to besot ourselves with your drugs, then you will rise up in rebellion against us, and cut all our throats." Here Eduardo laughed very loudly.

"We considered it, of course," Drax said. "But rejected the idea immediately. It would never have worked. There are millions of you invaders on our planet. If we killed you all, we would pollute our Earth with your bodies. Our god would never have stood for it."

"So what would he have done, this god of yours?"

"If we polluted his Earth? He would have slain us."

"So how come he doesn't kill us invaders, who conquered his people and robbed his temples?"

"I am not privy to my god's thoughts, much less his decisions. But since he is a thorough sort of deity, he doubtless has plans for you invaders."

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"And what would they be?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

It was a short interview, and apparently unsatisfactory to Eduardo, who waved Drax away. The conqueror remained sitting, his chin upon his hand.

A few weeks later, Eduardo again called for Drax. "I know your plan! It is the drugs, isn't it? You thought we would become stupid and careless with them. But such is not the case. I am smarter than ever, and my men are doing fine."

"I had no such thought," Drax said. "I have always believed the supposed drawbacks of drugs are greatly exaggerated."

"But you do not use them yourself?"

"Our god forbids them to us."

"And when did that begin?"

"The taboo began the day your ships appeared in our sky."

"Interesting.... Well, just as well. The stuff's too good for the underclass."

Drax bowed his head in the servile manner he was growing accustomed to.

"But the reason I asked to see you, my men have been reporting that their local temples are almost empty of drugs."

"Not even the greatest pile is inexhaustible."

"We want you and your people to give us more."

"There is no more."

"Then have your people get out there and grow some."

"We tried that, to no avail. No narcotic plant has grown on our planet since your arrival."

"And you attribute this to your god?"

"I suspect it's his way of doing things."

"People like me and my men are not going to be conquered by a lack of narcotics!"

Drax cringed and nodded. Eduardo remained sitting on the couch, his eyes fixed on nothingness. Drax noticed that Eduardo's hands were trembling slightly. Seeing that it was an opportune moment, Drax retired.

Nothing changed, life went on, but suddenly, everything changed. Earth historians have theorized that the conquerors had been buoyed up

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by their own exploits, and by the drugs that made them feel good, better, best. Suddenly all that was no more, and now there was an almost palpable gloom hanging over the invaders. The Earth and its peoples lived on quietly under their overlordship. Grain, vegetables, animals, fish, all flourished. All plants grew, except for the narcotic-producing ones. Life was quiet, and very tame. There were no new lands to conquer. Not on this planet at any rate.

And so, very suddenly, in one of those vagaries that are the bewilderment of learned men everywhere, the marauders voted en masse to pack up and move on to the next world, fresh glory, more conquests, and the next drug. And Eduardo, who was as good a politician as he was a warrior, had no choice but to follow the people's whim.

Drax was there when Eduardo walked to his spaceship, the last to take to the skies.

At the gangplank, Drax said, "Pleasant voyage, king, and great deeds ahead of you."

Eduardo looked sour. He said to Drax, "I don't know what you or your god did, but you tricked us. I'm sure of it. I still don't know why all my men want to leave this place. It's something you did. I really ought to kill you before I go."

But Drax had an answer. He said, "If you did that, who would see to raising your statue, building your temple, and clearing the sacred grounds? Who else but I would prepare things so my people could worship you as a god?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Eduardo said. He looked a little more cheerful. "I am a god. I fought your god and won. Put that on the statue!"

"The one who wins is the one who sets the rules. Our god says, 'He who laughs last laughs best.' Have a nice new conquest, Eduardo. But remember, while you were here on Earth, you merely occupied territory for a while. That's not the same as winning."

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From the Mississippi to the Styx, the river is one of literature's more potent images. While Gary Shockley's home in California is closer to Interstate 280 than it is to any river, he has gone to the well and brought up a winner with this haunting tale of a man on a raft.

The Lightning Bug Wars

By Gary W. Shockley

Part I

THE SUNFISH REFUSED TO die or drift away. It swam on its side close to the raft, splashing intermittently, a tendril of bright blood leeching from its gills into the muddy water. It seemed like hours ago that William had stuck the metal tip of a rope stringer down its throat and spun it until the hook came free with a flap of gizzard. After that the impulse to fish had left him, yet he kept a line in simply to be doing something. The shores remained far away, the raft at midriver, and without an oar he had no idea when the situation might change.

Ahead and to his right, a heron dropped from a tree to skim low over the surface, retreating downriver for the umpteenth time. William watched it settle in a deadwood on the left bank, then turned back to the bobber waltzing ten feet behind, a damsel fly perched on its tip. With a yawn he

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adjusted his straw hat against the midday Sun, slouched back in the folding leather chair, and was soon asleep.

A scraping sound woke him. The air had cooled off. It was late evening, and the Sun hugged the horizon, glinting through trees. He did not relish the idea of spending the night on the river. As he swatted at a mosquito, the scrape came again, and now he saw what it was. The raft no longer drifted, nor was it in midstream. Swinging wide around a bend, it had caught a snag in close to shore. He rose quickly. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for. With care he could walk the log to shore and escape the river at last. But he hesitated, feeling a strange compulsion to push off, to continue his aimless and endless drift —

An odd tapping sound broke the spell. He studied the cottonwoods and willows along the shore, thinking it a woodpecker. But it was too harsh for that, almost metallic, and seemed to come from close to the ground. Now curious, he picked up the anchor by the rope and underhanded it hard toward shore, just making it. He then stutter-stepped along the log and only got one foot wet making it to shore.

After securing the anchor, he followed the tapping up the bank. At times it stopped. At times he simply misread its direction. But slowly he closed in on the source. Passing through a mix of black locust, crabapple, and sumac, he tracked it to a jumble of rocks. Among them was a cleft, a cave.

His first thought was "bear." But he saw no tracks, nor was there an animal scent. The opening was small and steep, almost vertical. Tossing several sticks in, he ducked back as two bats fluttered out. The tapping stopped. He dug about in the vest he had found in the raft's hold and was rewarded with a small flashlight. Shining it into the opening, he made out a limestone floor five feet below. Putting aside his hat and vest, he cautiously lowered himself within.

Barely had he settled when something lunged at him with a howl. He fell backward, banging his head. To make matters worse, the flashlight winked out. Head throbbing, vision scintillating, he heard laughter. It was deep-throated and feminine, with just a touch of echo from the small cave. Then the tapping began anew. Turning the flashlight back on, he shone it about and then into a niche. A young woman crouched there, rock in hand, tapping the wall.

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"I frightened you, didn't I," she said, sounding pleased. She had her ear to the wall and seemed to be listening.

"Yes, you frightened me!" He checked his scalp for blood, felt none, but the throbbing persisted. "What if I'd had a weak heart?" Which in fact he did, the result of a childhood illness.

She tapped some more, not answering. She was dressed in black. Black leotards, black cape, black shoes. Even her hair was black. Yet her hands and face had a startling whiteness about them.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked, easing back against the wall, only to think better of it and step clear. He brushed at his back with the flashlight.

"Conversing with the turtles," she said, tapping some more. "They root about on the bottom and bang their shells on rocks. And I can hear them." She pressed her ear tighter to the wall. "They talk to me."

"You understand them?"

"No." She listened for a moment. "Not yet. They talk to me, and I talk to them. But we don't understand each other. Eventually we will, and then I'll learn what I need to know."

Did she really believe all this? Or was she putting him on? "Who are you?" he asked.

"Certainly you can guess." She snarled, showing two white fangs.

He decided to play along, at least for now. "So you're a vampire. Wonderful. What name are you going by this century?"

She snarled again, crawling out of the niche. Then she got up and spat the fangs into her hand. "Okay, so I'm not a vampire. You happy?" She skulked past him and climbed out of the cave.

He followed, wondering what this was all about. She had gone down the bank to stand at river's edge. Retrieving his hat and vest, he joined her there.

"How long you been on the river?" she asked, looking at the raft.

"Ever since morning."

"That's not long. Not long at all."

He didn't know what she meant by that. Then again, there were a lot of things he didn't know right now.

"What do you know about this river?" he asked.

"Pop's the one who knew it. He taught me some, but not much." She

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picked the anchor up by the rope and swung it lazily back and forth. "What do you want to know about it?"

"Well, for one thing, where is it headed? I haven't seen a bridge all day, and I never hear cars — just an occasional plane or tractor in the distance. Doesn't that seem odd?"

She lengthened her grip on the anchor rope, still swinging it. "Sometimes, if it's got something to teach you, and you're a slow learner, it doesn't go anywhere. Not for a while."

He laughed. "Well, I must be a very slow learner."

She swung the anchor overhead and underhanded it outward.

"Hey!"

It hit the raft with a clunk, reverberating into the empty oil drums that gave it buoyancy.

"Why did you do that!" As he watched, the raft pinwheeled off the snag and began to drift downriver.

She shrugged.

The sky was stained crimson with sunset, and a light breeze lifted fine strands of her glossy black hair into it. She held a blade of grass between her teeth. He could still smell the earthy rot of the cave. It came from her. He studied her profile, how the black cape snugged the small of her back, how her long hair fell loosely to her waist. She was late teens, certainly no more than twenty.

"The name's Lana," she said.

"William." He decided not to offer his hand. She was watching the sunfish splash lamely about in the shallows, floating awry. Her face betrayed no emotion.

"You've got a wife, and three children," she said. "No, make that four."

Three had been correct, all grown up. He watched the raft now far from shore, wheeling further about, drifting steadily downstream. "My wife passed away six months ago."

"How did she die?"

"Plane crash." It seemed easier to talk to a stranger. "She was supposed to take flight 1038, only it wasn't convenient for me to pick her up. So she changed it to 1137. That's the one that went down." He felt empty, saying it. It seemed like another world.

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She looked upward into the sky, her hair reaching midthigh. "I'd rather drown."

Two deer came down to the opposite bank, spotted them, and went bounding off. Lana slapped at a mosquito.

"I've got some repellent," he said, fumbling with his vest.

"No. I'm fine." Suddenly she turned to him. "Here."

He looked at her extended fist. "What is it?"

"It's for you. Go ahead. Take it."

He hesitated, then held out his hand.

She dropped a large white grub into his palm.

He watched it squiggle. Then he cupped it to his mouth and pretended to chew.

She laughed. "You're strange."

He tossed the grub into the water. "And what does that make you? Why do you dress like a vampire?"

She shrugged. "I like bats."

"You like bats." He didn't know what to make of such a statement.

"My pop hooked one once. He was casting out across the river when a bat flew over. It got tangled in the line down by the hook and flopped in the water. Pop was reeling it in when a blue cat struck. Twenty-one pounds. Pop had it mounted with the bat in its mouth. He says bats are chunks of the night that get bored, so they tear themselves loose and flap about looking for something to do. Only they don't have enough substance about themselves to do more than cause weird phenomena, like ball lightning, hailstones with crickets in them, crop circles — stuff like that."

"That's why you like bats?"

She nodded, her long hair cascading like black falls. "I like the night."

He noticed that the Sun was down and twilight was quickly settling in. Lightning bugs began to flash.

"You'd better be getting home."

"Not until morning," she said.

They were silent for a time. He studied her, puzzled by everything she said.

"You really came out here to talk to the turtles?"

She pointed. She pointed at a spot on the river directly in front of

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them. She held that pose for a long time before speaking. "That's where Pop died."

"On the river?"

"He drowned. Eleven years ago."

He was silent.

"We were fishing. Carp, crappie, bluegill, but mostly catfish. That's what we were after. Yellows, channels, maybe a blue or two. A stringer full. I caught the biggest. A blue cat. Mom stood up and fell in. I thought she did it on purpose, it happened so fast. Pop jumped in after her. It was all a joke. They had gone for a swim. I wanted to go swimming too. But Pop, he wouldn't answer me. Turned out he was too busy trying to save Mom. He couldn't."

"She died too?"

"Nope. She just disappeared. They pulled Pop's body out a week later. Said the turtles probably got Mom. But that isn't so. She could hold her breath a long time. I saw her do it in the pool. She held it until she reached the ocean and then held it a good deal longer. Living in Costa Rica now. That's where she always wanted to vacation."

Her expression was somber. She appeared dead serious. William followed her gaze out to midriver and back. "You really believe that?"

"Of course." She looked at him, suddenly spirited. "You like games?"

He felt the back of his head. A large knot was forming. "Not the kind you play."

"This is a real game. Like pinball."

"Pinball. Isn't that a little before your generation?"

She spat out the blade of grass. "Come on."

He looked at the raft drifting onward and made a helpless gesture. "Apparently you're the only game in town." He followed her up a path to a van parked in the woods. It was dusty black with fancy gold hubcaps and bright amoeba-like markings on the sides.

"This yours?" he asked. It didn't seem to fit her.

"I have a car," she said. "Two of them. But I prefer this."

He climbed in next to her. "Three cars? You must have inherited a bundle."

She started out at a crawl. He thought it was just because of the forest, but when they hit a decent dirt road, she continued at 35 miles per hour.

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"Don't like driving much," she admitted. "Too dangerous."

"Your parents were well off?" he pressed.

"Pop was the biggest vegetable farmer in these parts. He owned over a thousand acres. In fact, he would deliver vegetables to the markets in a van like this — except his was white. Everyone respected him. He knew the land, its quirks, its needs. He was an expert hunter, trapper, and fisherman. He knew all the spots. Something of a legend, I guess. Mom, she ran a greenhouse for a time. Exotic plants. But it got flattened by a freak dust devil. That's what Pop said anyway. Other people said it was a tornado. But she never rebuilt. I don't know why."

She turned into a large driveway, toggled an electric gate open and closed around her passage, and headed into a large estate. The grass was tall and weedy, with topiary hedges mutated beyond recognition. A large mansion swung into view.

"All this, and all you've got is pinball?" he asked.

"Oops." She hit the brakes, whipped the wheel, and floored it, tearing up the lawn in turning around. She zipped back down the lane and veered off toward a woods, stopping near it.

"Now what?" he asked her.

She pulled two mason jars from the glove compartment and handed him one. "We need lightning bugs." She jumped out and ran toward a flash. "Ten of them each." She made a dash for another one. "Better get fifteen just to be safe."

He climbed out and made several clumsy attempts at catching one.

"You okay?" she asked.

He huffed, hands on knees. "Sure. Just not much for vigorous exercise."

It took them fifteen minutes to catch that many, and she had to help him with his.

"Sometimes I like driving," she said, tearing up the lawn on the way back to the driveway.

At the mansion, she ran up to the front door. "Come on."

William climbed slowly from the van and studied the mansion. "Who all lives here?"

"Me, me — " She pushed the door inward against a long ominous creak. " — and me."

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He stepped up beside her. "It's a mighty big place for just the three of you."

She glanced at him, then stepped inside. "No family. No husband. Not even a boyfriend."

"Maybe you frighten them off."

She giggled. "I think I do."

He followed her inside. A grandfather clock stood in the hallway. A chandelier hung in the dining room off to the right. Cabinets full of knickknacks stood against the walls. Even from afar William could see that everything was dusty. The smell of garbage came from the kitchen.

"Come on. It's upstairs."

He paused, looking at what appeared to be a very long living room, except that the floor was concrete.

"That used to be the pool," she said. "Mom would do fifty laps every day. She was very athletic."

He followed her up the curving staircase. The ornately carved banister appeared to be walnut. He paused suddenly, wondering what he was doing here. He looked down at the front door.

"What's the matter? Afraid you'll lose?"

In the upstairs hallway she led him to the second door on the right. "This is where it is." She opened the door and turned on subdued lights. The floor was strewn with dirty clothes. She stepped in, scuffing them aside. Most were black. He followed. Then he stopped. He stared at a four-poster canopied bed.

"That's where I sleep," she said, dashing over to jump on it. "But only in the daytime. Night is too precious to waste on sleep."

Just past the bed, a black curtain hung across the room. Sparkles had been stuck to it, giving the impression of a starlit night.

She pulled back the black curtain. A lone coffee table occupied the far half of the room. Centered upon it was a fifty-gallon aquarium. It alone seemed free of dust in this place. Four fluorescent tubes glowed brilliantly in the top. William stepped closer, noting that the tank contained no fish nor even water, but an assortment of plants.

He studied them, recognizing a few. The most identifiable were the Venus flytraps. The pitcher plants were also self-evident. He pointed to several squat plants whose leaves glistened. "What are those?"

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"Various sundews."

The plants thrived, filling the aquarium. Flytraps and sundews carpeted the mossy bottom, while some pitchers rose trumpetlike to within inches of the glass lid.

"*Sarracenia flava*," she said, pointing to a tall yellow pitcher. "*Darlingtonia californica*, commonly called the cobra lily." It was green with a closed hood and prominent mustache. "*Sarracenia purpurea*." Squat and purplish.

He noted that each plant had a label near its base bearing a number: ten, twenty-five, fifty, seventy-five, one hundred. "Pinball," he said, beginning to understand.

"Mark them as you put them in," Lana said, rolling a tiny bottle of fluorescent blue paint his way. "Just a tiny dot on the tip of a wing." She tossed him a tiny brush. "And only ten of them. I'll catch you if you cheat."

He did as she said. She had cut twenty small access hatches in the Plexiglas sides as well as the top of the aquarium. She scampered about, opening these, stuffing in bugs, sealing them up. William did likewise.

Then they sat back and watched.

Some of the lightning bugs fell prey to Venus flytraps. Others entered the hoods of cobra lilies and slipped down their stems to join other decaying organic matter. Some became mired in the stickiness of various sundews. William studied the point values for each plant. The flytraps were worth a hundred points, which was the maximum. The cobra lilies, seventy-five. Other pitcher plants ranged from twenty-five to sixty points. The sundews were ten to fifty.

"Why are the sundews worth fewer points?" he asked.

"Because the bugs die fastest in them," she explained.

He nodded, puzzled that so demented a scoring scheme should make sense to him.

"In the cobra lily, they sometimes live for days," she said. "A flytrap, it's hard to say, but once it catches something, it won't open again for a week. And if it misses, it still takes hours to reopen. So I make them a hundred." She jumped up, went over and shut off the lights. Then she carefully tiptoed back. "Notice anything?"

"What do you mean?"

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"Look at the plants."

Then he saw. Several of the plants flashed, and others glowed. The flytraps were the most striking.

"Isn't it eerie?" she said.

As he focused on the glowing lights, his perspective shifted. Suddenly he was viewing a city from a great height. Sometimes he wondered what it had been like for his wife. Most likely she was huddled in her seat leaning forward in crash position for the good it would do her. But in his dreams she had a clear view of the ground rising to meet her, of El Paso with its thousands of lights growing immense all at once.

"What's the matter?"

"I have...dreams, like this. Sometimes."

"Dreams are good."

He snapped out of it. Lana was on all fours, pressing her face to the glass.

"Isn't it eerie?" she repeated. Her body was catlike. She crouched close by him, only inches away.

"Truly." He studied her face and hands. They seemed to glow as well.

Two hours later, using a black light, they identified their respective bugs and counted up the points.

"I win!" she shouted. "I win!" She leapt upon the bed, bouncing and bouncing and then falling limply into an unladylike sprawl. "I won."

He stood there, unable to take his eyes off of her.

"Too bad you didn't win," she said, "'cause then I'd have to do something for you."

Considering her inviting sprawl, he wondered at her meaning. Was she some sort of demented siren? But no, she was little more than a child, and this had been simply that, a game.

She rolled off the far side of the bed and began to strut about the room, kicking her dirty clothes about. "But I won." Her eyes flashed. "And now you have to do something for me."

"Pray tell."

"You'll help me. I'm hardly strong enough, but with your help I can do it."

"Do what?"

She laughed, opened the bedroom door, and stepped out. He heard her footsteps down the stairs.

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"Hey. Hey, wait up!" He caught up with her outside and followed her to a shed.

"We need two shovels," she said.

He was puffing again. "What for?"

"You're going to help me dig something up."

"What?"

"My pop."

"Lana." When she ignored him, he grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her about. "Lana!"

She thrust a shovel into his hands.

He looked at it and found himself asking, "Your pop?"

"Yep." She walked over to the van, tossed the two shovels recklessly in the back, and climbed in. "Come on."

"Your pop?" he asked again.

After twenty minutes driving down the dirt road, never topping thirty-five, she parked the van beneath a large oak, and they walked to what she claimed was a graveyard. There were a few markers, though they were wrecklessly atilt, and where she chose to start digging was entirely unmarked.

William crouched before a crooked stone. It was ancient, the engraving too worn away to decipher. Lana had begun to dig, and she scolded him for not keeping the flashlight on her work. Aiming it back her way, he continued to look about. This went beyond weird. This was crazy. What if they were caught? This was graverobbing. Then again, he still questioned whether this was really a cemetery. The smell of fresh-turned earth filled his lungs. It was her smell. She had removed her black cape, under which she wore black leotards. He watched her small breasts buck against the thin fabric as she kicked the shovel in.

"You're supposed to be helping," she said, stopping to wipe her brow.

"I'm no grave robber."

"That's the last time you play with me." She went back to digging.

"Besides," he said. "Your father isn't buried here."

"He is."

"There's no marker."

"He didn't want a marker."

He played the light along her black leotards, then angled it away,

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realizing he was watching the tightening of her buttocks as she kicked the shovel in. At last he climbed to his feet and came forward. "This is crazy. You know that?"

As he began to dig, he felt like a fool and a criminal combined.

"Why do you want to dig him up?" he asked.

"To see if he's turned into a fish."

"Oh." He continued to dig. Her craziness was infectious. Ludicrous as it all was, he found himself getting caught up in it.

A blinding light interrupted his latest thrust.

"Hey! You hold it right there."

It was a watchman.

Before he could react, Lana scooped up handfuls of dirt and flung them into the watchman's face. "Come on!" she shouted.

He lumbered after her, relieved that the watchman appeared to be in worse shape than he was.

"Climb in, quick!"

Lana had already begun to drive off when he threw himself into the van.

As they sped off, Lana was frightened. "That was almost it, wasn't it?" she said. "We almost got caught. What's the punishment for grave-robbing? Would we have ended up in prison? God, that was close." But as she continued to drive, she grew angry. "Stupid watchman. What's a watchman doing out there anyhow? We should have knocked him out. That's what we should have done. We almost had Pop. Damn that watchman!" Then her anger gave way to amusement, and she laughed at how William had run, and how she had almost driven off without him. "It was the shovel," she said. "That's the only reason I waited for you."

By the time they reached the mansion, she had grown quiet. She braked to a halt and turned the ignition off.

He climbed out and waited. She remained sitting at the wheel.

"Lana?"

She sat there, unmoving.

He walked around the van and opened her door. He nudged her. She was catatonic. He tried repeatedly to wake her. Then, as gently as he could, he slid his arms under and around her and hefted her up, finding her heavier than he had hoped. But somehow he managed to carry her to the front door, which she had left unlocked, and then up the stairs to her room.

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Dumping her on the four-poster bed, he collapsed in a nearby armchair to wheeze and grip his chest. He hadn't thought to bring his pills. He didn't think he would need them. Now he had the ugly vision of police swarming the bedroom, the coroner speculating, rumors flying — Forcing aside such nonsense, he turned his attention back to Lana. With an effort he rose and went to her.

"Lana?" He ran a hand through her long black hair. "Lana, can you hear me?" He gripped her chalky hand.

"Pop?" she said. "Pop?"

"It's William," he said.

He stayed until she was sound asleep. For a time he considered spending the night on the sofa downstairs. But the place bothered him. He wasn't entirely certain she had told the truth about living alone. And what would it look like if other family members showed up to find him sleeping here? At last he left, careful to lock the door after him.

Walking down the long lane under a full Moon, he puzzled at why it did not lead to any major road, just the dirt one that they had followed up from the river, that they had followed to the graveyard. Then, to his surprise, he saw the river. It wasn't far from the mansion at all. Having nowhere else to go, he headed for it.

Reaching the bank, he saw something drifting in close to shore. The raft! How could that be? He had watched it go downriver. Nonetheless, here it was, soon to drift by. Wading in up to his knees, he managed to throw himself onto its deck. There he lay, staring up at the stars, reviewing the day's events, trying to make sense of it all.

The splash was all too familiar. Peering over the edge, he saw framed in the Moon's reflection the sunfish floating on its side, blood still trailing from its gills. He drew back quickly, sickened, then retreated further to the folding leather chair, where he sat down, exhausted, and drifted off to sleep.

PART II

He slept fitfully throughout the night, ever wakened by little sounds or the bite of a mosquito. Dawn found him tired and irritable, hungry too. As he banged around in the storage compartment, the heron took flight

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once more, advancing further downstream. He found a propane cooker, which inspired him to try fishing again. Baiting up, he put in the line.

Cicadas sawed, a racoon chittered. Bluejays dipped out of trees to play tag low over the water. A breeze sprang up, driving cottonwood fluffs on a patch of still water back into the air. Two tiger swallowtails flitted past. A deerfly buzzed relentlessly about his hat.

He drifted.

Edging around a bend, he spotted the barest island up ahead. The heron stood on it. He sat very still, wondering how close he could get before it took flight. It did not. As he drifted closer, he realized it wasn't the heron at all but a young girl dressed entirely in white.

She stood there, unmoving, looking out across the river. She couldn't have been more than ten. She wore a white bonnet and a frilly white dress and seemed unaware of his approach.

"Are you stranded?" he asked, coming abreast.

She looked down at herself, then up at him.

"Do you need a lift?"

As if only now realizing her predicament, she stepped toward him into the water.

"Wait. Hey, wait! Maybe I can get closer — " He hefted the anchor, ready to underhand it toward the island. But he held up as she continued to wade toward him. By the time she reached the raft, she was up to her waist in water. He knelt and reached down to help her, but she found the rungs of a ladder he had not known existed and climbed aboard by herself.

As she stood there dripping on the deck, he realized how familiar she looked. She had the eyes and nose of Lana, though the chin was different, as was the hair. And she was only half Lana's age.

"You'll catch your death of cold," he said with concern. She was soaked, and there were no towels or blankets aboard. "How long you been waiting like that? What were you up to?"

She sat down on the edge of the raft and wrung out the folds of her dress. "Daydreaming." Then she pulled up her legs and took off her shoes. Her feet were unusually white.

"Never mind, never mind. My name's William. Yours?"

She looked at him, then down at the anchor beside her. She shifted away from it. "Raelene."

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"That's a pretty name."

"That's what everyone says."

The sunfish splashed next to the raft. He glimpsed it swimming akilter along the surface, cutting wide arcs. It bumped the raft, cut another arc, bumped again.

Raelene watched it like one might a fireplace.

"What you using for bait?" she asked.

"Worms."

"Got any minnows?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know what bait you got?"

"I don't know much of anything."

She got up and walked over to the storage hold. "I know one thing. You stole this raft."

"Oh?"

Opening the trapdoor, she reached down, banging things about. "Nope, no minnows." Closing it, she grabbed up his rod and reeled in his line.

"You gotta fish deeper," she said, looking at the bobber position. "Or you'll just keep gettin' sunfish like that. Go down five or six feet for the blues and channels. 'Course, you'll get snags, too, and bullheads and carp, but that's just the river, no way around it."

He watched as she adjusted the bobber, put on a fresh worm, and cast out.

"I didn't steal it," he said.

She let out some line, then clicked the bail and put the pole in the fork.

"I saw it and was curious," he said. "It looked abandoned. When I stepped aboard, it just unmoored itself."

"Where'd you find it?"

"Now, that's a good question. I don't know the region very well. But I was standing on a bridge, and when I looked down, I saw it."

"Tattler's Bridge."

"Couldn't tell you. Like I said, I don't know the region."

"No one goes there anymore. Were you going to jump?"

He looked at her, startled. "You ask a lot of questions." He went over and sat down. He watched a muskrat cutting a V-wake to shore. "I could be asking you a lot of questions, you know."

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"It just unmoored itself."

He wasn't certain whether he was amused by her interrogation or losing patience. "Like I said, I stepped aboard and suddenly it was adrift."

"Why didn't you just row back to shore?"

He laughed. "No oars. Imagine that."

"You could've swum back to shore."

"I don't swim. Now, isn't it about my turn? What are you doing out here alone? Are you a runaway?"

She shook her head. "My folks live downstream."

"Really." He slapped his thighs. "Well, seems we're headed in the right direction then. Take the chair, Cap'n." He rose, but when she made no move for it, he settled back.

He watched as she tidied things up. She kept dripping. It occurred to him even her bonnet seemed wet.

"You shouldn't leave the bait out in the Sun," she said.

"I should know better," he grumbled, watching her put things back in the hold. "Your parents raised you well. It shows."

She now worked at the anchor rope. Untying it from the corner of the raft, she pushed the rope and then the anchor over the side. He stared in disbelief.

"Did you just do what I think you did?"

She ignored him.

"You just threw away our anchor!"

"I don't much care for anchors."

"Well, that's all well and good. But it wasn't your anchor to toss!"

"Not yours either."

"Yeah, yeah." He leaned back with a sigh. "Well, looks like we're on the express now, no stops between here and — " He didn't finish.

"You're from the city, aren't ya."

"It shows, does it? Well, I'm thinking of going country."

"All city folks say that."

"I mean it."

"When will you go back?" she asked.

"I just got done telling you — " He caught himself, caught his own lie. "When I feel ready."

She sat down, facing downstream. "Same here."

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Tugging the brim of his straw hat low over his face, he closed his eyes and chuckled. "We're a pair. Aren't we the pair."

Some fifteen minutes later he slapped the brim up and leaned sharply forward.

"That's it," he said, listening to the familiar tapping. "Just like before. Only it can't be, unless we're going in circles. Could we — ?" He twisted about to address Raelene, but she wasn't there. He was alone on the raft.

Settling back, he reviewed all that had happened with Raelene, how he had spotted her on the island, picked her up, their argument about whether he had stolen the raft, how she had tidied things up, adjusted his bobber — He snapped back to the moment, spotting a familiar snag. The raft was drifting once more toward it.

He had no way of securing the raft, now that the anchor was gone. As soon as the raft made contact, he waltzed haphazardly ashore. The raft shifted uncertainly behind him, threatening to break free, threatening to stay.

Not until he found the cave was he sure this was the same spot. Once more he slid down in, flashlight in hand. Crouching in the darkness, he listened. The tapping had ceased. "Lana?" he whispered. "Lana?" He waited a full five minutes before switching on the flashlight. When he did, he leapt backward with a shout at someone only inches away. The flashlight popped loose and went out as he banged his head. He lay there, dazed.

"William," a deep feminine voice reached him. "It is you, isn't it?"

"Lana?" He knew it had to be, but he dared not believe it.

The flashlight came on in front of him, in her hand. She aimed it up at her face, producing a ghoulish countenance with two large white fangs. She laughed. It was a deeper, softer laugh than he remembered.

"Still on the river, I see." It was more statement than question.

He sat up slowly, rubbing his head. "Oh, I've become quite the drifter. It seems all I'm able to do these days. And you. I see you're still a creature of the night." He started to chuckle, but it sounded all wrong and it hurt his head. "So. What do the turtles tell you these days?"

She turned the flashlight off. A moment later he felt her slap it into his hand. He left it off.

"I went to Costa Rica," her voice reached him through the darkness.

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"Spent a month looking for Mom. I don't think she's there. I think the turtles are holding her hostage somewhere in the river."

He was thankful she could not see his expression. "Hostage?"

"She's in the river somewhere. I'm certain of it."

William turned on the flashlight, aiming it off to the side so as not to blind her. She was dressed much the same as last time. Black cape. Black leotards. Long black hair. "They've made demands?"

Her hands seemed to ball into fists, but it was just the play of shadows as she shifted about.

"I still don't understand their language. I think they keep changing it so humans can't figure it out." She stepped past him and climbed up out of the cave. He waited a moment, uncertain how he wanted to handle this encounter, then followed.

They stood on the bank of the river as dusk settled in.

"Do you have a sister?" he asked.

"Sister? Why do you ask? But yes. I did have one. Little Raelene. But she was killed by a life belt."

He felt a sudden chill. "She's dead?"

"Mom and Pop always made us wear life belts when we were near the water. We had a raft out on the river, anchored in place. It was deep there. Maybe twenty, twenty-five feet. Raelene, she liked to jump in and pull herself down the anchor rope, all the way to the bottom. Sometimes she'd toss in pretty stones, then go down and get them. That's where they found her, down by the anchor. Her belt had clipped to the rope where it tied to the anchor, and she couldn't get it undone. So she tried to climb. That's what the coroner said. She grabbed the rope and tried to pull herself and the anchor all the way to the top. Only she didn't quite make it."

Still shaken, William tried to find something to say. "The river has not been kind to your family."

"The river doesn't feel, it doesn't pick and choose. It's just water trying to get away."

Lightning bugs began to flash in the trees on the far shore. Looking aside, he saw that she had grown more angular, now very much a woman. Her hair was the same glossy black, only longer, hanging to her knees. A delicate wind caught it, filled the space behind her with it. Her paleness was startling, making him wonder if the Sun ever touched her. She shaded

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her eyes with a hand, as though the lightning bugs were too bright. She still smelled of the cave.

"Saw my pop finally," she said, chewing on a blade of grass. "He had gills. Some whiskers, too. A bit of a dorsal fin. But it's too early. So I put him back in the ground."

He eyed her uncertainly. She looked around at him and chuckled. Why, he wasn't certain. Perhaps she knew the implausibility of all that she said.

As he watched her standing there in the breeze, her hips forward, shoulders back, arms half-folded, a contemplative look on her face, he realized how much he was drawn to her. It wasn't just her physical charms, which were considerable. It was her mind. Yes, her mind captivated him. But it also disturbed him. For though he wanted to believe her games all playful pretense, there remained the real possibility that she was genuinely deranged.

"You know something, William?" she said, studying her fingers as she flexed them. "You're the only person who understands me. The only person I ever let into my confidence. I'm glad I met you. The first time. And now."

She walked slowly along the bank to the left, looking very tired — tired of life. He watched her, sensing that they were parting company, never to meet again.

He looked out on the river, at the spot where her father had drowned and her mother had disappeared, and he tried to imagine her mother holding her breath all this time, and how she was trapped in a cage even now somewhere on the bottom, with turtle sentinels patrolling the area, tapping the bottom rocks to communicate with each other. And he tried to imagine Lana's father turning into a fish.

"Well?"

He looked aside. She stood with her hands on her hips, looking impatient, or perhaps just impish.

"Well, what?"

"The game," she said. "We must always play the game."

He followed her through the forest to her van, only this time it was lavender, with inexplicable yellow bubbles painted on the rear half. She had become a more conservative driver, now keeping to thirty miles an

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hour. He tried to enjoy the scenery, but found himself increasingly impatient. As they started up the drive, he asked, "Don't we need lightning bugs?"

Lana hit the brakes, whipped the wheel, and floored it, running over several shapeless hedges. She drove back down the lane and veered off toward the forest, just like before. But, arriving there, she just sat for a while.

"What am I thinking?" She slowly brought the van about and back to the lane and eventually to the mansion.

Stepping through the front door, William stopped in amazement. Rubber bands stretched everywhere, between lamps and tabletops and across bookcases and tableleg to tableleg, from nails embedded in walls to other nails, or to the chandelier or wall pictures, across doorways and from ceiling to floor. There were thousands of them, long, short, thick, thin, long chains of them stretched in every conceivable direction between every conceivable object.

"I see you have a new hobby," he remarked as they wended their way up the stairs. It was an obstacle course of taut rubber bands.

"Oh?"

"These rubber bands," he said.

"My pop thought rubber bands were the greatest invention in the world," she said. "Next to ice cream. He fixed boat motors with them. I saw him do it. Said if they'd used rubber bands on that Shuttle, it wouldn't have blown up."

William could have done without the mention of an air disaster.

They worked their way further up the stairs.

"Rubber bands give the place a sense of tension, an impending feeling," she said. "As if something is about to happen. Listen."

He stopped, heard a snap. Some time later he heard another. And then another.

"They wear out after a while," she explained. "It takes a couple months, usually. But they can last from minutes to years, depending. The laws of probability say they will someday break all at once. It will destroy this mansion, surely. And we'll be buried alive." She hugged the thought to herself, savoring it for a moment. "Would you like some ice cream?"

"No thanks."

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She hesitated, as if considering whether she wanted some, then resumed the assault on the stairs.

Reaching the upper floor, they headed down the hallway. This time she stopped at the first door. Smiling at him, she opened it.

Inside, the walls, floor, and ceiling were covered with lightning bugs. Some flew about, and with dusk upon them they flashed. Their patterns varied. Some had the on-off, on-off signal indigenous to the area. But others flashed twice in rapid succession, stayed off for a second, then repeated. A few stayed on for fifteen seconds or more, slowly fading.

"You raise them yourself?" he asked.

She nodded, closing the door behind them. "And make hybrids. Of course, the plants don't care. They're all just so much food, right?" She handed him a mason jar. "We'll need a hundred each."

"A hundred!"

"The stakes are higher this time."

He wanted to ask her more about the stakes, but did not. The lightning bugs were easy enough to catch. They were everywhere. When he had gathered up a hundred, he followed her back out into the rubber-band-choked hallway and to the next door. She opened it. "Go on inside," she said. "I'll be back in a minute."

He stepped inside. Rubber bands stretched everywhere, floor to ceiling to wall, between dressers, nightstand, bedposts, closet doors, even piles of clothes. He stared at the four-poster canopied bed. It was thickly strung with rubber bands, crosswise from post to post, from the canopy down to the posts, with rubber bands connecting rubber bands. The bedspread was more obscured than visible.

"Here's your ice cream."

He turned to her. She held two dishes of ice cream. Both were vanilla. He considered pointing out that he had said no, but decided to let it pass. It was a big bowl. A small spider crawled along the lip.

"Whoops," she said, seeing it. She guided it onto her hand and brushed it onto a lamp. It climbed upward.

"Pop said that spiders are naturally clumsy, and that's why they have eight legs — to compensate. He studied them a lot."

"He liked spiders?"

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"The small ones. If they were smaller than a quarter, legs and all, he'd leave them alone in the house. But bigger than that, he'd squash them. Me, I don't mind them up to a silver dollar. But that's my limit." She moved over to the bed, set her ice cream down. "I've got some tarantulas. You want to see them?"

"No."

"Come on. They won't bite. Well, not usually."

"I don't like spiders."

Nonetheless she dug out a small wire cage from beneath the bed. He could see several tarantulas inside. She scooped them up, sat down against the side of the bed, tugged the straps of her leotards off her so-white shoulders, and placed a tarantula on each.

"They tickle. You should try it. It tickles."

He forced himself to look. Something was wrong with them. They could hardly move. They wobbled and bobbled. With horror he realized that their legs were far too short.

"They were bigger than a silver dollar," she explained, "so I had to trim them down."

He shuddered and backed away. "Put them away. Just put them away!"

The revulsion welling up in him failed to quell an equal fascination. Feeling ever less in control, he looked at the bed behind her and imagined her tied there, tied down with countless rubber bands, while he thrust into her, thrust and thrust like some grub because his limbs had been trimmed.

He rubbed his eyes and was relieved to see her putting away the tarantulas.

"See?" she said, pulling aside the curtain that blocked off the far half of the room. "I told you I'd improved it."

The coffee table and aquarium were gone. In their place was a glass miniature of the mansion. They could both have stood in it with room to spare, had it not been overflowing with plants. Stepping close, he admired the lush greens, reds, purples, and yellows, all set ablaze by miniature fluorescent bulbs and tubes in strategic locations. Some plants grew in hanging pots upstairs and in the attic. These were Nepenthes, she explained. Tropical vines sporting tublike pitchers. Other plants carpeted

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the soil medium at the bottom. In all there were forty or more hanging pots, and a virtual jungle of ground-cover carnivores.

He walked around it, fascinated by the attention to detail, the variety of plants, the ingenious lighting, all the tiny one-way access funnels for introducing the lightning bugs. But equally he felt apprehensive, wondering at the stakes.

"Well? Shall we begin?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'd like to study it a bit more."

"Smart," she said. "You're getting smarter." She insinuated herself among the rubber bands on the bed, squeezing her way in and among them until she lay watching him, captive of elasticity. "I'll give you fifteen minutes."

He could have used more time. She was a constant distraction. Rubber bands kept snapping, and he was aware of her watching, ever watching, from the bed.

"You won't win," she said.

He turned and pieced together her black-shrouded body among the rubber bands. "Supposing I do?"

She taunted him with a whimsical smile. "You won't."

"Well, we shall see." He rubbed his hands together, signaling his readiness.

The game commenced. William marked his bugs and introduced them nearest the cobra lilies and other large pitcher plants. Though flytraps were worth more, they were mixed in with sundews of much lower point value. To his surprise, Lana utilized the very strategy he had rejected, dumping most of hers in low. He watched with delight as several immediately became mired in sundews.

"You're doing very well," she conceded after fifteen minutes. "I believe you have the early lead."

He still felt he had the lead after half an hour. But the tables were beginning to turn. Her bugs were now hitting the flytraps hard. Meanwhile, his bugs were taking flight from the pitchers only to land in the sundews below.

"There, you did well there," she granted, pointing to a stout hairy pitcher. "*Cephalotus follicularis*. Eighty-five points."

But it was a rare high score for him right now. The sundews were

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killing him. And Lana had begun to trumpet his every small defeat. "Hail ye, *Drosera tracyi*," she said as one of his succumbed to a sundew. "Hail ye, *Drosera capensis*."

He watched in despair as his lead dwindled.

For her own scores, she had a different and irritating chant. "*Sarracenia oreophila*, ka-ching! *Dionaea muscipula*, ka-ching! *Nepenthes hirsuta*, ka-ching!"

An hour later, even though several lightning bugs continued to wander, he knew that he was beaten. Lana went over and turned off the lights. The glass model of the mansion flashed and glowed with nearly two hundred trapped lightning bugs. The vision was hypnotic. As he stared at it, William suddenly felt himself falling from a great height toward a neon-lit city. He tried to shake free of the horrific vision. He tried to close his ears to the screams, the weightlessness soon to end, city lights looming up —

"Concede?"

He jumped, felt the cold sweat on his brow. Try as he might, he could no longer picture in his mind his wife's face. Slowly he nodded.

"You're getting good at this," she said, rising to turn the lights back on. "If we play again, you just might get your way." She retreated into a walk-in closet. "But not this time."

He rose slowly, shakily. He could hear her changing clothes. "What now?" he asked. She seemed to be struggling a bit with whatever she was putting on. "Please, not another graveyard."

"William," she scolded, her voice straining with her efforts. "I've matured!"

When, moments later, she stepped from the closet, he felt a serious escalation in his misgivings. She was dressed in a black skin-tight rubber suit.

"Pop isn't in the ground anymore," she said, holding out another suit for him. "I checked last month. It took me a while to locate him after that. Go on. Change into this. If it doesn't fit, I've got others."

After considerable more goading, he took his turn in the closet, feeling like a pervert on top of being a fool. "So, where is he?" he dared to ask.

"In this zoo," she said. "In one of the aquariums. He's too heavy for me to get out by myself. So that's why you've volunteered."

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At last William waddled out, feeling ridiculous. "Lana. This is crazy."

"You played the game," she snapped. "You lost. You knew the stakes." Her voice softened. "It's not far. Just down the road."

He found it hard to believe that anything — let alone a zoo — could be just down the road.

Lana had made other preparations, buying an old beat-up Cadillac from a private owner, into which she had installed a huge aquarium in the back seat. As she took corners, it sloshed ominously. For once thirty felt too fast. She drove down the dirt road that seemed to go nowhere. An hour passed, and still they had not hit a main road. Occasionally in the glow of the headlights he glimpsed corn or soybeans, sometimes cattle. Once he spotted an abandoned tractor. But not once did he see a house or barn. And though telephone poles marched next to them, they never branched off, never led to a building or to lights. Nor did any spot on the horizon glow with the hint of some distant town.

Then, abruptly, absurdly, they came upon a parking lot. Two other cars were present, which Lana parked well away from.

"You've got to be kidding," he murmured, staring at the sign on the distant gate. It read, "Toledo Zoo." They were nowhere near Toledo.

Climbing out, she pulled a heavy-duty trash bag from the glove compartment and worked air into it. It was big enough to hold a person. Reluctantly he squeaked out the passenger side.

"Where did you get the key?" he asked as she worked the lock to the front gate.

She didn't answer.

They slipped through the shadows past the chatter of monkeys and parrots to the aquarium building. She had a key to that as well. Inside, she directed him down the rows of fish tanks to a large one in the corner. He gaped at the huge dark fish swimming about inside. Then he looked at the label.

Malapterurus electricus.

He sensed what it was even before he read its common name: Giant African Electric Catfish.

Now he understood the rubber suits.

"William, meet Pop."

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He stared at the creature. It swam upside down along the surface, its belly black, its stomach white. The inscription noted that this was its normal feeding orientation. He looked for an indication of its weight but found none.

"Step back," she said.

Barely had he done so when she swung a crowbar, cracking the Plexiglas. She had to hit it several times. William heard splashes in nearby tanks as other fish panicked. Water squirted out, then came in a deluge, and suddenly the catfish was flopping about on the floor.

"Quick! Put him in the bag!"

It was easier said than done. But once he got the head started, he was able to nudge the rest in after it. Drawing the bag closed, he tried to heft it over his shoulder only to find it too heavy. The squirming didn't help.

"Come on, come on!" Alarms had started, and Lana was running for the door.

Backstepping clumsily, he dragged it after him.

Outside the gate, halfway to the car, he heard a police siren. Lana was at the car, the backdoor open, preparing the aquarium.

"Hurry up!" she hissed.

He tried to speed up, but it was impossible. A squad car screeched to a halt beside him, lights flashing, and a policeman leaped out.

"Hold it right there. Halt! On the ground! Now!"

He struggled onward until the pavement slammed him in the side.

"Damn you!" Lana shouted.

As he wrestled with the policeman, he saw Lana looming over them. She flashed in the squad car's strobe, her expression dark and sinister. The crowbar in her upraised hands flashed too. But she seemed frozen, indecisive, until the crowbar fell from her grip. Then with a terrifying animal growl she grabbed hold of the bag and tugged it away. The policeman reacted swiftly, grabbing it as well. As the two engaged in a tug-o-war, William twisted aside, knocking the policeman over.

"Go on!" he shouted, lunging atop the policeman.

As he fought to keep the upper hand, he saw Lana at the car, squeezing into the back seat past the aquarium, dragging the bag in after her. She climbed out the other side.

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"Come on!" she shouted.

But the policeman was on top again, on the verge of pinning him. He heard the engine rev.

"Come on!" she called again.

The car lurched to a stop beside them.

"Fuck you, William!" she seethed. "Fuck you!" She floored it and was gone.

With an inhuman effort he twisted onto his stomach. His hand found something. It was the crowbar. He turned and swung it hard. The policeman howled, gripping his knee. And then William was up and running.

He ran after taillights that gradually faded, and for an instant it seemed he was falling upward, away from a city. But leaves and twigs stung his face, he was in a woods, stumbling over roots, bouncing off saplings, barely able to see the river in time to halt on its bank.

The river. Gasping for breath, feeling the dangerous pounding of his heart, he gazed out over its placid surface. The howling continued, but now it came from above, a wind in the trees; and the squad car's strobe had given way to lightning bugs flashing all about. Something dark drifted past. He knew what it would be, and he lost little time wading in. Waist deep in muddy water, he groped desperately along its sides for the ladder that had to be there. The effort might have been too great for him had not small hands found his and a soft voice spoken words of encouragement, coaxing him upward and aboard.

PART III

RAELENE WAS OLDER now, perhaps fifteen. She found a change of clothes for him in the hold. While she turned her back, he squeaked out of the suffocating rubber with relief. Soon he was sprawled in the folding leather chair, sipping rain water she had collected, feeling the tension draining out of him.

"You've met my sister," said Raelene.

Did she know? Or was it a question? "Yes. A couple of times."

Raelene had been frying up crappie when he came aboard. It smelled

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delicious. She dished out a filet on a catalpa leaf and handed it to him. "Is she over it yet?"

He nibbled at the filet, then ate ravenously. "She's, uh, still working out some issues."

The sunfish splashed in the water near the raft. She watched it for a time, then went back to cooking. "Too sensitive. Lana was always too sensitive. Pop worried about her. Still does."

He gave her a sharp look. In the moonlight, her face seemed angelic.

"You're not over it either," she said.

He shifted uncomfortably. He still didn't know how to get over it. Looking up, he realized Raelene was studying him at length, her eyes incredibly moist.

"Perhaps I will stay with you a while," she said.

They drifted downstream an indeterminate amount of time. He was aware of ice on the river, of spring thunderstorms, tornadoes weaving in the distance, and then the sweltering heat of long hot summer days, and it all started over again. How they survived the bitter winters, he wasn't quite certain, as he wasn't sure of anything about this place he had fallen into. His nightmares did abate, but in their place he had strange visions of the river becoming a waterfall, down which he fell in slow motion. What awaited him at the bottom, he had no way of knowing.

Over this period of time, Raelene grew disproportionately older. On one particular chilly autumn day as they kissed, he noticed the deep and wizened crinkles about her eyes and how gray her hair had become. He wasn't certain when exactly they had become lovers, but it had a peculiar valence. She was always damp, and cold. She tried to apologize for this, but he would not stand for it, assuring her that her touch was comforting, he had grown to enjoy it, as if she were the river itself. For he had developed a deep appreciation for the river, despite its many troublesome aspects.

While at first Raelene managed the raft for him, catching minnows, baiting hooks, pulling in his catch, as well as keeping everything organized and put away, soon he was doing it for himself. She taught him the ins and outs of the river, how to read its bends, where it was deep, where shallow, what fish lurked where, what their appetite was at any given time.

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"Your pop would be proud of you," he said at one point, then wondered if he should have phrased it in the present tense. "You've become the woman of the river."

"Pop knew much more," she said. "Much much more."

And always the sunfish was there, flopping about on its side, making desperate little circular runs, bleeding for an eternity.

"When will it die?" he asked her. "Why won't it die?"

She would not attempt an answer.

Occasionally a turtle would lift its head like the periscope of a miniature sub. Raelene had taught him to recognize the snappers. Several times he watched snappers approach the sunfish, only to turn away inexplicably.

One day he woke from a nap in late evening. As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, something about the river gave him pause. The bend up ahead looked familiar.

"This is the spot," he said, sitting forward, listening for the tapping. Though there was none, he remained certain of it. "This is where I met your sister."

When he looked over his shoulder, he found himself once more alone.

The raft barely brushed the snag this time. He made a daring leap, tottered precariously, then managed his way to the shore. Meanwhile, the raft drifted onward.

Already apprehensive as he huffed up the bank, he grew more so. There was still no tapping. Was something wrong? Had he been mistaken about this spot? Then he stopped in his tracks. Through the weave of limbs and foliage before him, where he would have expected the cave, he saw a dark and foreboding structure. Drawing closer, he recognized it for a house. A mansion. There was no driveway, no cars, no nothing, just a big black front door edging on wilderness.

The black bat-shaped knocker was cold to the touch. He gave it a sharp rap, again, and still again. Turning the knob, he found it unlocked. He shielded his eyes as brightness spilled out. Warm humid air took away his breath. Plants were everywhere, covering the floor, filling bookcases, sitting atop tables and cabinets, and hanging from the ceiling. The inner walls were of glass, as was the ceiling, and through them, clouded by condensation, he could see adjacent rooms, upper-floor rooms, all filled

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with plants. In one of the rooms overhead, he spotted the four-poster canopied bed.

He looked about for the spot where the cave should be. Sure enough, there was a trapdoor. Lifting it, he descended a ladder into a passage that jackknifed sharply to keep out light from above. Following it, he soon stepped into the darkness of the cave. He had brought his flashlight, but was hesitant to use it. Instead he sat down. Though there was no sound, no evidence whatsoever that anyone was present, he sensed her crouched in that crevice before him, rock in hand, pausing in her communications with the turtles. Hoping that his eyes would soon adjust, he waited, but to no avail.

Something stirred in the darkness and stepped around him. Puzzled, he rose and followed, glimpsing white feet going up the ladder. He gave her a moment before climbing after her. Once more the fluorescent lights blinded him. Shielding his eyes, he spotted her halfway up the staircase.

"Lana?"

Without looking back, she motioned him to follow.

Up there, in the room that had been filled with lightning bugs the last time, she dumped a bin full of lightning bugs into a large trash bag.

"So, you've come to play the game once more," she said.

She looked older and wiser. Her face was long and gaunt, haunted by the years. Yet it made her all the more beautiful.

He felt himself flushing with anger. "Lana. Ask me how I've been."

She ignored him.

"Lana!" He grabbed her shoulders and spun her about. "Ask me how I've been!"

She turned back to her work. "Okay, William. How have you been?"

"Well, I got away. After you sped off, I did get away. Not that you seem to care."

She brushed lightning bugs off the lip of the bin and into the trash bag. "My pop spent time in prison. Said it was good for him. Taught him patience. I never saw him give up on anything. Not ever." She seemed to reflect on this as she closed the trash bag.

He sighed, feeling his anger dissipate like so much mist. "How is Pop?"

"Fine," she said. "He's in the river now. I do appreciate your help

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getting him from the zoo. But he hasn't found Mom yet. He will. He will." She slammed the bin lid shut and stood there for a second, her knuckles white as she clutched the top of the bag. Then she swung the bag around and dropped it at his feet. "These are yours. They're already marked and counted. Count them again if you must." She began to fill a second trash bag from another bin.

He hefted the bag, testing its weight. "How many are we talking here?"

"Five thousand."

"Five thousand!" He felt suddenly afraid. Of her. Of the game. "Just what are the stakes this time?"

"You know I don't talk stakes until afterward. It would spoil the game."

"To hell with suspense."

She studied him for a moment. "Pop is having trouble getting downstream. There are dams in the way. They have to be...removed."

William dropped the bag and walked over to the doorway. He shook his head, looking back at her. "Lana. This is getting totally out of hand. Don't you understand how impossible it is for your mother to have held her breath all this time, or for your father to have turned into a catfish? Not just any old catfish, either. No, this one's a giant African electric catfish! Lana, have you seen your pop since you put him in the river?"

She was silent.

"That catfish is native to the Nile! Have you ever heard of the Nile freezing over?"

"I'll blow the dams up myself."

He studied her carefully, then came back to grab up his bag. "With this many, how do we count the points?"

"I'll know who's won," she said.

He gave her a suspicious look.

"I — " She lifted her hands in a helpless gesture, unable to explain it. "I'll know. Go on, now. Look around. I'll give you fifteen minutes to study things."

He walked through the mansion, amazed at the wide variety of carnivorous plants. He heard occasional jets of mist, felt moisture settle on him like the softest silk. The collection of Nepenthes was cosmopolitan.

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Their vines hung everywhere, ending in colorful pitchers, some tub-like, others trumpetlike. He studied them and the other plants, getting a feel for their organization, and after fifteen minutes he returned to find Lana waiting for him.

"Seen enough?" she asked.

"Impressive," he said. "You've probably got one of the best collections in the world."

The compliment did not affect her. She pointed to his bag. "You've got five minutes to scatter them. That's not a lot of time, so don't get too picky." Hefting her bag, she trotted off.

He dumped most of his down along the edges of the floor, close to flytraps and sundews, hoping they would choose the former. Some of them he dumped upstairs on the walls, as close to the ceiling as possible. Why, he wasn't sure. He just did it. When he was done, he retired to Lana's room, where she lay facedown on the bed. He sat down in a rocking chair, where he held his curiosity in check for a full hour.

"Lana? What happened to the old place?"

"Destroyed by the laws of probability," she said into the pillow, emphasizing each syllable. She turned over and stared at the ceiling. "It was late last year. All those rubber bands broke at once, just like I said they might. The whole place came apart like a house of cards. Even lost the van. So I rebuilt here."

He rocked for a moment, looking about. "This must be more convenient for you. You can hold communion with the turtles any time you want."

She stared at the ceiling and said nothing.

"Have you learned their language yet?"

She looked sharply at him, appearing angry. Then she turned back over and buried her face in the pillow.

He let her be after that. He grew sleepy. He dozed. Eventually he fell into a deep sleep, and he dreamed.

He was coming to meet Lana again. Only this time he arrived early. He had brought bear traps with him, which he set throughout the cave. Then he waited. He waited in the recess where she would always listen to the turtles. At last she appeared, a shadow in the entranceway, climbing downward, stepping forward. Clack! A shriek. Clack! Another cry. And

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she fell backward. Clack! Clack! The cave reverberated to her screams. He stepped forward, shining his light into her pale face, noting the long gleaming fangs. "Lana," he spoke. "This time you lose." He pointed the flashlight at the tags on the traps, each bearing a negative number. She laughed through her tears and made a sarcastic remark. He didn't quite catch it, but he knew it was sarcastic. So he pulled from his carry-bag the stake and mallet. He positioned the stake over her heart and cocked his arm far back for the fatal blow. But a rumble had started behind him. The rocks fell aside, letting in a great rush of river water that filled the cavern to his waist. That was when he saw it. A giant catfish moving his way, the water shimmering with the lines of its electromagnetic force.

He woke with a start as it brushed his stomach, then gave an even greater start, for in the darkness before him he saw the lights of a city, a city all about, as if he had already hit it and was now absorbed into its asphalt, its steel, its neon. Only then did he spot the bedposts nearby. Lana had sat up and was studying him. She had apparently turned out the lights. Through translucent plant membranes everywhere, lightning bugs flashed and glowed.

"Pop always liked lightning bugs," she said, looking at one that crawled across her hand. "You know what their flashes really are?" She held the lightning bug up in front of her face. "Synapses firing in the brain of God. That's what Pop said."

He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. "Pop believed in God, then?"

"I don't think so. I think he was just speaking figuratively. He did that a lot." The lightning bug took flight. She watched it land on a Nepenthes overhead. "You were having a nightmare, weren't you."

"Just a dream."

She seemed peeved by his reluctance to open up. After a moment she got up and walked out.

He found her down by the river. The lightning bugs should have ceased their activity by now, but they still flashed in the trees all about, the river reflecting it all. Synapses in the brain of God. He wondered if she had released mutant varieties into the wilds that would flash all night. She stood there at the edge of the water, chewing on a blade of grass, her white face and hands seeming brighter than the lightning bugs themselves.

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"Lana?" he said. "What's wrong?"

After a pause, she spit out the blade of grass. "I think maybe the turtles got my mom." She tugged another one from the bank. "I mean, I think they ate her. She could hold her breath a long time, but not this long."

He was surprised to hear her say this. He wanted to comfort her, give her hope, but that would just feed the madness that she seemed about to overcome.

"You're winning, you know," she said. "The river has taught you much since you were here last time."

He shrugged. "I'm not certain I've learned anything."

She toed the muddy water, sending gentle ripples outward. "The river teaches you, whether you think so or not. It giveth, and it can taketh away."

Suddenly she tossed her cape aside and kicked off her slippers. "Come on, William. Let's go swimming."

Fear seized him. "No, Lana. Lana, I don't know how to swim."

"Then you just watch me." She peeled off her leotards and kicked them off.

William squinted. She shone like a giant lightning bug. "Lana. This isn't a good idea."

She lifted her arms high overhead and stretched. William had never seen anything so beautiful. He watched as she launched herself horizontally into the water. The river erupted from silence. Ripples flowed outward, distorting lightning bug reflections. Her arms swung overhead, splashing the night. He looked out past her, imagining the spot where her parents had drowned. As if cueing off his line of sight, she angled in that direction. Before long she was at the spot. She maneuvered about and looked back at him. She looked at him for an eternity, the waves damping away as she gently treaded water.

"Good-bye, William," she said.

"Damn you!" he shouted at the top of his voice, kicking off his shoes and tearing at his shirt. There was hardly a ripple to mark the spot where she had been. Stumbling into the water, he hit a sharp root and fell forward. He thrashed about in a crude dog-paddle, choking on water. He had not taken off his pants; they created a drag. But he continued to thrash

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and choke on water, modifying his movements slowly to increase his forward motion.

After endless minutes of flailing, he arrived exhausted at the spot where he thought she had gone under. Taking several deep breaths, he ducked his head and tried to dive. It proved more difficult than he could have imagined, but he stuck with it and fought his way under. He kicked and paddled downward, groping about, determined to stay under until he found her. His lungs felt ready to burst when he bumped something. Snagging an arm, he struggled upward. He was desperate for air, but the water held him down. He felt himself passing out. And then his hand broke the surface. His head followed, and he exhaled explosively, then choked on water on the inhale. He nearly lost the arm as he choked and choked. The shore seemed impossibly far away. He struggled to bring Lana's head above water while thrashing the surface, still choking, inching toward shore.

When his hand struck something, he instinctively grabbed hold. It couldn't be the shore, because his toes still hadn't found bottom. He twisted about for a better view.

The raft.

He groped along its side until he found the rungs of the ladder. Somehow gaining a toehold, he leveraged himself up with one hand while keeping a tight grip on her wrist. He weighed a ton coming out of the water, and it took a monumental effort to roll onto the raft's deck. Then he did something even more difficult. With all the power of his being he pulled Lana up out of the water, grabbed her about the waist, and — the raft dangerously atilt — wrenched her sprawling onto the deck beside him.

Exhausted though he was, he knew this was not the time to rest. He turned Lana onto her stomach and pushed hard on her back. Water poured out of her mouth. He did it again and again, not knowing if he was doing it right. He turned her onto her back and pressed on her chest. More water came out, and with it a sudden choking sound. He turned her onto her side so the water would drain out of her mouth.

"Lana?" he said.

She did not answer. But she was breathing.

He knelt at her side, sobbing, listening to her glorious signs of life. The

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river had quieted to the barest ripples spreading from the raft. Lightning bugs flashed all about. One landed on her cheek, and he left it there.

"It's okay, Lana," he said. "Everything's okay now."

Seeing her shiver, he grabbed up the flashlight and crawled to the hold. Lifting the trapdoor, he shone the light down and about. As he feared, there were no towels or blankets, nothing to dry her off. But something else caught his attention down there, which made him beat a hasty retreat to her side. Sprawling next to her, he tried to put out of his mind the sight of box upon box of dynamite.

As he lay there, dangerously close to the edge, he heard the sunfish splashing just below. Another sound then reached him. It was a gentle popping. The river had grown still once more, but there was a sinuous wake in the distance, something moving about. Rising on an elbow, he watched it draw closer, growing ever bigger. Something about it seemed askew, and then he realized what it was. It was swimming upside down, the black belly bobbing in and out of sight, gleaming in the moonlight. Nearing the raft, it suddenly vanished. He leaned over the edge, looking for some sign of it. Instead he saw the sunfish directly below, on its side, gill leaching blood. His gaze then shifted aside as something grew out of the depths. As it gently broke the surface, he recognized the big flat head, the wide mouth, the side whiskers...

"Hi, Pop," he whispered.

It lingered there for some time, looking up at him. Then it opened its mouth wide, creating a whirlpool that sucked down the sunfish, after which it sank slowly into the dark depths and was gone.

Lana stirred, gave a little cry.

"It's okay, Lana," he said, comforting her. "Everything's going to be okay.

He lay down and rested his head on Lana's bare, luminous thigh. He heard other sounds now. A plane in the distance. A sputtering tractor. A train whistle. Cars on a road. And again he heard the catfish in the distance, sucking at the surface, making odd little sounds as if it were talking to itself, saying its own name over and over: Pop...pop...pop.

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LUCIUS SHEPARD

ATTACK OF THE CLOONEYS

I ONCE TOLD a Hollywood agent it struck me as odd that a studio had decided to change a character in a screenplay based on a novel of mine from a nineteen-year-old raw recruit into a middle-aged top sergeant. Her response was, "You're lucky they didn't turn him into a black grandmother." The point my agent was in essence making was that when you sell a piece of intellectual property to Hollywood, you often come to wonder why they bothered to buy it at all, because they have modified your work to such a degree that they could easily have circumvented the copyright laws and produced their own variant work without paying you a nickel. Which leads me to consider the question of Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris*. If it was Soderbergh's intent to turn Stanislaw Lem's novel of ideas into a romance, why not just hack out a screenplay, slap a more pertinent title on the puppy — *Astronaut Love Crud* or some such — and avoid paying a substantial sum for the rights? What's left of the story might be tweaked to bear no copyrightable resemblance to Lem's book and the original title surely has no great resonance in the public mind. While the novel is considered a minor classic within the bounds of the genre, I assume that, prior to the movie's release, were you to ask an average sampling of the populace what *Solaris* was, they would likely have responded by saying it was a brand of sun block or a new model Chevrolet.

In 1972 Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky made a version of the Lem novel that ran for approximately three hours, a movie that some critics have called a work

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of art and others describe as tedious and pretentious. (I tend to straddle the fence on the isssue and think of Tarkovsky's movie as a tedious and pretentious work of art.) The most remarkable thing about this new verson is that Soderbergh's picture — essentially a distillation of the Russian film — runs a mere ninety-eight minutes but feels as though it lasts every bit as long as Tarkovsky's. The story is set in a future that appears to differ from our present in only a few ways — men's suits have no lapels, it rains all the time, they have really cool TVs set in plastic panels, and the space program has unaccountably bounded forward and established a station orbiting a remote poem of a planet called Solaris, a globe done all in swirling indigos, electric blues and greens, replete with thready electric thingies designed to resemble synaptic transmissions — the whole deal looks very much like a high-end Lava Lamp such as one might find in The Sharper Image catalog. Psychiatrist Chris Kelvin (George Clooney) receives a message from his friend, Dr. Gibarian, aboard the station asking him to come and help unravel a mysterious problem. On his arrival he discovers that Dr. Gibarian has killed himself. Indeed, everyone on the station is dead except for Dr. Gordon (Viola Davis) and science wonk Snow (Jeremy Davies), both of whom are displaying symptoms of psychoses. Unable to make any sense of the situation, exhausted, Kelvin goes to sleep in his quarters and wakes to find his wife Rheya (Natascha McElhone), who committed suicide several years before, giving him a hug. Freaked by her presence, suspecting she is — well, we're not really sure what he suspects at this point — he leads her into an escape pod and jettisons her into space; but when next Kelvin falls asleep, Rheya reappears and this time he becomes reconciled to her presence and sets about attempting to understand what she and the "visitors" who have attached themselves to Snow and Gordon are, and further to determine what should be done about them.

Though it is the consensus among Snow, Gordon, and Kelvin that the "visitors" are somehow being manufactured from their memories by Solaris itself, none of them appear to be in the least concerned with how this is being achieved. Of the planet we are told, "it reacts as if it knows it's being observed," and that is all. No further mention is made of Solaris's possible sentience — the idea that

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occupies the heart of Lem's novel — and thus the planet's potentials come to seem those of an enormous magic bean that grants wishes whether you want it to or not. Soderbergh seems chiefly interested in the love story between Kelvin and Rheya, and for the first part of the movie this suffices. Rapidly intercut flashbacks fill the audience in on Rheya's mental difficulties and the marital problems that drove her to suicide, and we soon learn that her present incarnation, configured solely from Kelvin's memories of her, is as confused and unhappy as was her original, albeit for slightly different reasons. But as the movie progresses we discover that while Soderbergh is less than engaged by the scientific aspects of the story, he finds the metaphysical shadings downright fascinating and rather than emulating the poetic melancholy that infuses the Tarkovsky film, the script devolves into a sophomoric speculation on the nature of identity, with snatches of dialog that one might expect to run across in a Classic Comics rendering of a Hermann Hesse novel, often given a ludicrously portentous weight by Chris Martinez's overbearing score, and a happy ending that is entirely inappropriate both to the sterile feel of the film and to the bloody events that precede it. An unwitting complicitor in this downward spiral is the leading man. George Clooney has proved himself to be a serviceable comedic actor, but though he appears to be giving the part of Chris Kelvin his best shot, he lacks the chops to do drama. When called upon to project fear or existential confusion, he merely succeeds in looking as if he has eaten some bad clams. But the true architect of his failure — and of the film's — is Steven Soderbergh.

Technically, for the most part, *Solaris* is state of the art, its editing and cinematography top notch, but it's evident that Soderbergh is not overly conversant with science fiction. Lately he has directed a series of remakes *(Ocean's 11, Traffic)*, and it may be that, mistaking the commercial success of these films for a proof of genius, he has come to look upon himself as able to do a quick study and thus become the master of each and every genre. Judging by the set design in *Solaris*, it would seem that a number of science fiction films have made an impression on him, including *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Lathe of Heaven*, and most notably Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The docking sequence in *Solaris* is almost a

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quote from that film, and throughout there are sequences that reflect Kubrick's influence. Yet while this is somewhat annoying, it is his refocusing of the story that stands as his most egregious error. The sentient ocean of Lem's novel, an entity capable of replicating not only people but cities, would — in this age of CGI effects — have made a memorable centerpiece for a movie that lacks any memorable centrality. Without this underpinning, Kelvin's interaction with Rheya seems less redolent of cosmic mystery than of pure idiocy. I mean, one would think that after a bad marriage to a mentally disturbed woman who kills herself after a quarrel, after a subsequent liaison with her — let's say — clone who kills herself by drinking liquid oxygen (only to be reborn), even an unreasonably smitten man would find this a cure for obsession. Had there been, however, some scientific promise in her origin, some hint that this new Rheya offered Kelvin at least a scant hope of fulfillment, a portrayal of that relationship would have not only made more sense, it might have created a magical sense of wonder, a quality the film possesses in short supply. Soderbergh's decision to concentrate on the question of identity strikes me as an almost equally myopic choice. The recognition of Philip K. Dick's work as a source for cinematic stories appears to have exercised a deadening effect upon whatever remained of the Hollywood imagination. What is reality? What is life? Do clones have souls? Does George Clooney? Variants of these questions, simplistically stated, have informed the thematic structure of a veritable deluge of recent films, including a mainly regrettable batch treating of Dick's own properties, most recently *Imposter* and *The 6th Day*. It is as if Hollywood has decided that science fiction is either a monster-disaster genre or else should be invested with the intellectual content such as might be gathered from sitting in one evening on a Survey of Contemporary Philosophy course at an especially nondescript community college. Given the staleness of the thematic material, the stilted dialogue in the second half of the film, its derivative setting and underequipped leading man, *Solaris* ultimately weighs in neither as an entertainment nor as a serious film, but rather as the latest in a line of movies (a la *American Beauty*, *AI*, *Road to Perdition*) in which the studios have taken a ponderous stab at doing art and produced instead a series of

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pompous, self-important, expensively mounted Technicolor belches.

As the saying goes, the third time is a charm. It's easy to see what a great genre film Soderbergh could have made from Lem's novel, and since this *Solaris* falls so far short of realizing its source materials, it's tempting to hope that another director will pick up the torch and shoot a film that actually dares to tell Lem's story rather than "making it more accessible," "tuning it to the present," "updating it," or any one of a number of popular studio strategies that every one translate to "screwing it up" or "removing all the individuality." Considering what directors like Darren Aronofsky and Christopher Nolan and various others might do with the project.... It's an alluring prospect. But the chances are, given the necessarily high investment, the multiplicity of voices that would badger the director, whoever he turned out to be, into broadening the picture's appeal, it's probably not worth the effort. For my part, I would prefer to skip another remake, to revisit the novel, close my eyes and imagine what might have been.

F&SF Flashback

...what I gleaned of *Solaris* inevitably leads to the following conclusion: it is one of the most Godawful, pretentiously sentimental, dull, endless, silly movies I have ever seen. The dialogue is mostly portentous drivel about truth, Man, and love which leads nowhere, but which goes on forever. The effects are minimal — a well designed space station and a liquid vortex ocean are about the extent of them.

The concepts are laughable: the planet Solaris seems about as accessible to what appears to be a contemporary civilization as Bermuda and, as another example, during a gravity loss, only the hero, the girl, a book, and a candelabrum float about — everything else stays nicely put.

I could go on, but what's the use? Some nitwits have compared *Solaris* to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. After thinking about that for some time, I literally don't know what to say. Words, for once, fail me.

— Baird Searles, *F&SF*, February 1977

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Thanks to M. Rickert's latest tale (and with apologies to Mr. Carroll), the time has come to talk of many things: of goats and planes and jingling bells — of bread and bombs — and why the neighbors act so strange — and whether kids are mean...

Bread and Bombs

By M. Rickert

THE STRANGE CHILDREN OF the Manmensvitzender family did not go to school so we only knew they had moved into the old house on the hill because Bobby had watched them move in with their strange assortment of rocking chairs and goats. We couldn't imagine how anyone would live there, where the windows were all broken and the yard was thorny with brambles. For a while we expected to see the children, two daughters who, Bobby said, had hair like smoke and eyes like black olives, at school. But they never came.

We were in the fourth grade, that age that seems like waking from a long slumber into the world the adults imposed, streets we weren't allowed to cross, things we weren't allowed to say, and crossing them, and saying them. The mysterious Manmensvitzender children were just another in a series of revelations that year, including the much more exciting (and sometimes disturbing) evolution of our bodies. Our parents, without exception, had raised us with this subject so thoroughly explored that Lisa Bitten knew how to say vagina before she knew her address and

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Ralph Linster delivered his little brother, Petey, when his mother went into labor one night when it suddenly started snowing before his father could get home. But the real significance of this information didn't start to sink in until that year. We were waking to the wonders of the world and the body; the strange realizations that a friend was cute, or stinky, or picked her nose, or was fat, or wore dirty underpants, or had eyes that didn't blink when he looked at you real close and all of a sudden you felt like blushing.

When the crab apple tree blossomed a brilliant pink, buzzing with honey bees, and our teacher, Mrs. Graymoore, looked out the window and sighed, we passed notes across the rows and made wild plans for the school picnic, how we would ambush her with water balloons and throw pies at the principal. Of course none of this happened. Only Trina Needles was disappointed because she really believed it would but she still wore bows in her hair and secretly sucked her thumb and was nothing but a big baby.

Released into summer we ran home or biked home shouting for joy and escape and then began doing everything we could think of, all those things we'd imagined doing while Mrs. Graymoore sighed at the crab apple tree which had already lost its brilliance and once again looked ordinary. We threw balls, rode bikes, rolled skateboards down the driveway, picked flowers, fought, made up, and it was still hours before dinner. We watched TV, and didn't think about being bored, but after a while we hung upside down and watched it that way, or switched the channels back and forth or found reasons to fight with anyone in the house. (I was alone, however and could not indulge in this.) That's when we heard the strange noise of goats and bells. In the mothy gray of TV rooms, we pulled back the drapes, and peered out windows into a yellowed sunlight.

The two Manmensvitzender girls in bright clothes the color of a circus, and gauzy scarves, one purple, the other red, glittering with sequins came rolling down the street in a wooden wagon pulled by two goats with bells around their necks. That is how the trouble began. The news accounts never mention any of this; the flame of crab apple blossoms, our innocence, the sound of bells. Instead they focus on the unhappy results. They say we were wild. Uncared for. Strange. They say we were dangerous. As if life was amber and we were formed and suspended in that form, not evolved into that ungainly shape of horror,

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and evolved out of it, as we are, into a teacher, a dancer, a welder, a lawyer, several soldiers, two doctors, and me, a writer.

Everybody promises during times like those days immediately following the tragedy that lives have been ruined, futures shattered but only Trina Needles fell for that and eventually committed suicide. The rest of us suffered various forms of censure and then went on with our lives. Yes it is true, with a dark past but, you may be surprised to learn, that can be lived with. The hand that holds the pen (or chalk, or the stethoscope, or the gun, or lover's skin) is so different from the hand that lit the match, and so incapable of such an act that it is not even a matter of forgiveness, or healing. It's strange to look back and believe that any of that was me or us. Are you who you were then? Eleven years old and watching the dust motes spin lazily down a beam of sunlight that ruins the picture on the TV and there is a sound of bells and goats and a laugh so pure we all come running to watch the girls in their bright colored scarves, sitting in the goat cart which stops in a stutter of goat-hoofed steps and clatter of wooden wheels when we surround it to observe those dark eyes and pretty faces. The younger girl, if size is any indication, smiling, and the other, younger than us, but at least eight or nine, with huge tears rolling down her brown cheeks.

We stand there for a while, staring, and then Bobby says, "What's a matter with her?"

The younger girl looks at her sister who seems to be trying to smile in spite of the tears. "She just cries all the time."

Bobby nods and squints at the girl who continues to cry though she manages to ask, "Where have you kids come from?"

He looks around the group with an are-you-kidding kind of look but anyone can tell he likes the weeping girl, whose dark eyes and lashes glisten with tears that glitter in the sun. "It's summer vacation."

Trina, who has been furtively sucking her thumb, says, "Can I have a ride?" The girls say sure. She pushes her way through the little crowd and climbs into the cart. The younger girl smiles at her. The other seems to try but cries especially loud. Trina looks like she might start crying too until the younger one says, "Don't worry. It's just how she is." The crying girl shakes the reigns and the little bells ring and the goats and cart go clattering down the hill. We listen to Trina's shrill scream but we know

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she's all right. When they come back we take turns until our parents call us home with whistles and shouts and screen doors slam. We go home for dinner, and the girls head home themselves, the one still crying, the other singing to the accompaniment of bells.

"I see you were playing with the refugees," my mother says. "You be careful around those girls. I don't want you going to their house."

"I didn't go to their house. We just played with the goats and the wagon."

"Well all right then, but stay away from there. What are they like?"

"One laughs a lot. The other cries all the time."

"Don't eat anything they offer you."

"Why not?"

"Just don't."

"Can't you just explain to me why not?"

"I don't have to explain to you, young lady, I'm your mother."

We didn't see the girls the next day or the day after that. On the third day Bobby, who had begun to carry a comb in his back pocket and part his hair on the side, said, "Well hell, let's just go there." He started up the hill but none of us followed.

When he came back that evening we rushed him for information about his visit, shouting questions at him like reporters. "Did you eat anything?" I asked, "My mother says not to eat anything there."

He turned and fixed me with such a look that for a moment I forgot he was my age, just a kid like me, in spite of the new way he was combing his hair and the steady gaze of his blue eyes. "Your mother is prejudiced," he said. He turned his back to me and reached into his pocket, pulling out a fist that he opened to reveal a handful of small, brightly wrapped candies. Trina reached her pudgy fingers into Bobby's palm and plucked out one bright orange one. This was followed by a flurry of hands until there was only Bobby's empty palm.

Parents started calling kids home. My mother stood in the doorway but she was too far away to see what we were doing. Candy wrappers floated down the sidewalk in swirls of blue, green, red, yellow and orange.

My mother and I usually ate separately. When I was at my dad's we ate together in front of the TV which she said was barbaric.

"Was he drinking?" she'd ask. Mother was convinced my father was

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an alcoholic and thought I did not remember those years when he had to leave work early because I'd called and told him how she was asleep on the couch, still in her pajamas, the coffee table littered with cans and bottles which he threw in the trash with a grim expression and few words.

My mother stands, leaning against the counter, and watches me. "Did you play with those girls today?"

"No. Bobby did though."

"Well, that figures, nobody really watches out for that boy. I remember when his daddy was in high school with me. Did I ever tell you that?"

"Uh-huh."

"He was a handsome man. Bobby's a nice looking boy too but you stay away from him. I think you play with him too much."

"I hardly play with him at all. He plays with those girls all day."

"Did he say anything about them?"

"He said some people are prejudiced."

"Oh, he did, did he? Where'd he get such an idea anyway? Must be his grandpa. You listen to me, there's nobody even talks that way anymore except for a few rabble rousers, and there's a reason for that. People are dead because of that family. You just remember that. Many, many people died because of them."

"You mean Bobby's, or the girls?"

"Well, both actually. But most especially those girls. He didn't eat anything, did he?"

I looked out the window, pretending a new interest in our backyard, then, at her, with a little start, as though suddenly awoken. "What? Uh, no."

She stared at me with squinted eyes. I pretended to be unconcerned. She tapped her red fingernails against the kitchen counter. "You listen to me," she said in a sharp voice, "there's a war going on."

I rolled my eyes.

"You don't even remember, do you? Well, how could you, you were just a toddler. But there was a time when this country didn't know war. Why, people used to fly in airplanes all the time."

I stopped my fork halfway to my mouth. "Well, how stupid was that?"

"You don't understand. Everybody did it. It was a way to get from one place to another. Your grandparents did it a lot, and your father and I did too."

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"You were on an airplane?"

"Even you." She smiled. "See, you don't know so much, missy. The world used to be safe, and then, one day, it wasn't. And those people," she pointed at the kitchen window, straight at the Millers' house, but I knew that wasn't who she meant, "started it."

"They're just a couple of kids."

"Well, not them exactly, but I mean the country they come from. That's why I want you to be careful. There's no telling what they're doing here. So little Bobby and his radical grandpa can say we're all prejudiced but who even talks that way anymore?" She walked over to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down in front of me. "I want you to understand, there's no way to know about evil. So just stay away from them. Promise me."

Evil. Hard to understand. I nodded.

"Well, all right." She pushed back the chair, stood up, grabbed her pack of cigarettes from the windowsill. "Make sure not to leave any crumbs. This is the time of year for ants."

From the kitchen window I could see my mother sitting on the picnic table, a gray plume of smoke spiraling away from her. I rinsed my dishes, loaded the dishwasher, wiped the table and went outside to sit on the front steps and think about the world I never knew. The house on top of the hill blazed in the full sun. The broken windows had been covered by some sort of plastic that swallowed the light.

That night one flew over Oakgrove. I woke up and put my helmet on. My mother was screaming in her room, too frightened to help. My hands didn't shake the way hers did, and I didn't lie in my bed screaming. I put the helmet on and listened to it fly past. Not us. Not our town. Not tonight. I fell asleep with the helmet on and in the morning woke up with the marks of it dented on my cheeks.

Now, when summer approaches, I count the weeks when the apple trees and lilacs are in blossom, the tulips and daffodils in bloom before they droop with summer's heat and I think how it is so much like that period of our innocence, that waking into the world with all its incandescence, before being subdued by its shadows into what we became.

"You should have known the world then," my father says, when I visit him at the nursing home.

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We've heard it so much it doesn't mean anything. The cakes, the money, the endless assortment of everything.

"We used to have six different kinds of cereal at one time," he raises his finger instructively, "coated in sugar, can you imagine? It used to go stale. We threw it out. And the planes. The sky used to be filled with them. Really. People traveled that way, whole families did. It didn't matter if someone moved away. Hell, you just got on a plane to see them."

Whenever he speaks like this, whenever any of them do, they sound bewildered, amazed. He shakes his head, he sighs. "We were so happy."

I CANNOT HEAR about those times without thinking of spring flowers, children's laughter, the sound of bells and clatter of goats. Smoke.

Bobby sits in the cart, holding the reigns, a pretty dark-skinned girl on either side of him. They ride up and down the street all morning, laughing and crying, their gauzy scarves blowing behind them like rainbows.

The flags droop listlessly from flagpoles and porches. Butterflies flit in and out of gardens. The Whitehall twins play in their backyard and the squeaky sound of their unoiled swings echoes through the neighborhood. Mrs. Renquat has taken the day off to take several kids to the park. I am not invited, probably because I hate Becky Renquat and told her so several times during the school year, pulling her hair which was a stream of white gold so bright I could not resist it. It is Ralph Paterson's birthday and most of the little kids are spending the day with him and his dad at The Snowman's Cave Amusement Park where they get to do all the things kids used to do when snow was still safe, like sledding, and building snowmen. Lina Breedsore and Carol Minstreet went to the mall with their baby-sitter who has a boyfriend who works at the movie theater and can sneak them in to watch movies all day long. The town is empty except for the baby Whitehall twins, Trina Needles who is sucking her thumb and reading a book on her porch swing, and Bobby, going up and down the street with the Manmensvitzender girls and their goats. I sit on my porch picking at the scabs on my knees but Bobby speaks only to them, in a voice so low I can't hear what he says. Finally I stand up and block their way. The goats and cart stutter to a stop, the bells still jingling as Bobby says, "What's up, Weyers?"

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He has eyes so blue, I recently discovered, I cannot look into them for more than thirty seconds, as though they burn me. Instead I look at the girls who are both smiling, even the one who is crying.

"What's your problem?" I say.

Her dark eyes widen, increasing the pool of milky white around them. She looks at Bobby. The sequins of her scarf catch the sun.

"Jesus Christ, Weyers, what are you talking about?"

"I just want a know," I say still looking at her, "what it is with all this crying all the time, I mean like is it a disease, or what?"

"Oh for Christ's sake." The goats' heads rear, and the bells jingle. Bobby pulls on the reigns. The goats step back with clomps and the rattle of wheels but I continue to block their path. "What's your problem?"

"It's a perfectly reasonable question," I shout at his shadow against the bright sun. "I just wanta know what her problem is."

"It's none of your business," he shouts and at the same time the smaller girl speaks.

"What?" I say to her.

"It's the war, and all the suffering."

Bobby holds the goats steady. The other girl holds onto his arm. She smiles at me but continues to weep.

"Well, so? Did something happen to her?"

"It's just how she is. She always cries."

"That's stupid."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Weyers!"

"You can't cry all the time, that's no way to live."

Bobby steers the goats and cart around me. The younger girl turns and stares at me until, at some distance, she waves but I turn away without waving back.

BEFORE IT WAS ABANDONED and then occupied by the Manmensvitzenders the big house on the hill had been owned by the Richters. "Oh sure they were rich," my father says when I tell him I am researching a book. "But you know, we all were. You should have seen the cakes! And the catalogs. We used to get these catalogs in the mail and you could buy anything that way, they'd mail it to you, even cake. We used to get this

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catalog, what was it called, Henry and Danny? Something like that. Two guys'.names. Anyhow, when we were young it was just fruit but then, when the whole country was rich you could order spongecake with buttercream, or they had these towers of packages they'd send you, filled with candy and nuts and cookies, and chocolate, and oh my God, right in the mail."

"You were telling me about the Richters."

"Terrible thing what happened to them, the whole family."

"It was the snow, right?"

"Your brother, Jaime, that's when we lost him."

"We don't have to talk about that."

"Everything changed after that, you know. That's what got your mother started. Most folks just lost one, some not even, but you know those Richters. That big house on the hill and when it snowed they all went sledding. The world was different then."

"I can't imagine."

"Well, neither could we. Nobody could of guessed it. And believe me, we were guessing. Everyone tried to figure what they would do next. But snow? I mean how evil is that anyway?"

"How many?"

"Oh, thousands. Thousands."

"No, I mean how many Richters?"

"All six of them. First the children and then the parents."

"Wasn't it unusual for adults to get infected?"

"Well, not that many of us played in the snow the way they did."

"So you must have sensed it, or something."

"What? No. We were just so busy then. Very busy. I wish I could remember. But I can't. What we were so busy with." He rubs his eyes and stares out the window. "It wasn't your fault. I want you to know I understand that."

"Pop."

"I mean you kids, that's just the world we gave you, so full of evil you didn't even know the difference."

"We knew, Pop."

"You still don't know. What do you think of when you think of snow?"

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"I think of death."

"Well, there you have it. Before that happened it meant joy. Peace and joy."

"I can't imagine."

"Well, that's my point."

"Are you feeling all right?" She dishes out the macaroni, puts the bowl in front of me and stands, leaning against the counter, to watch me eat.

I shrug.

She places a cold palm on my forehead. Steps back and frowns. "You didn't eat anything from those girls, did you?"

I shake my head. She is just about to speak when I say, "But the other kids did."

"Who? When?" She leans so close that I can see the lines of makeup sharp against her skin.

"Bobby. Some of the other kids. They ate candy."

Her hand comes palm down, hard, against the table. The macaroni bowl jumps, and the silverware. Some milk spills. "Didn't I tell you?" she shouts.

"Bobby plays with them all the time now."

She squints at me, shakes her head, then snaps her jaw with grim resolve. "When? When did they eat this candy?"

"I don't know. Days ago. Nothing happened. They said it was good."

Her mouth opens and closes like a fish. She turns on her heels and grabs the phone as she leaves the kitchen. The door slams. I can see her through the window, pacing the backyard, her arms gesturing wildly.

My mother organized the town meeting and everybody came, dressed up like it was church. The only people who weren't there were the Manmensvitzenders, for obvious reasons. Most people brought their kids, even the babies who sucked thumbs or blanket corners. I was there and so was Bobby with his grandpa who chewed the stem of a cold pipe and kept leaning over and whispering to his grandson during the proceedings which quickly became heated, though there wasn't much argument, the heat being fueled by just the general excitement of it, my mother especially in

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her roses dress, her lips painted a bright red so that even I came to some understanding that she had a certain beauty though I was too young to understand what about that beauty wasn't entirely pleasing. "We have to remember that we are all soldiers in this war," she said to much applause.

Mr. Smyths suggested a sort of house arrest but my mother pointed out that would entail someone from town bringing groceries to them. "Everybody knows these people are starving. Who's going to pay for all this bread anyway?" she said. "Why should we have to pay for it?"

Mrs. Mathers said something about justice.

Mr. Hallensway said, "No one is innocent anymore."

My mother, who stood at the front of the room, leaning slightly against the village board table, said, "Then it's decided."

Mrs. Foley, who had just moved to town from the recently destroyed Chesterville, stood up, in that way she had of sort of crouching into her shoulders, with those eyes that looked around nervously so that some of us had secretly taken to calling her Bird Woman, and with a shaky voice, so soft everyone had to lean forward to hear, said, "Are any of the children actually sick?"

The adults looked at each other and each other's children. I could tell that my mother was disappointed that no one reported any symptoms. The discussion turned to the bright colored candies when Bobby, without standing or raising his hand, said in a loud voice, "Is that what this is about? Do you mean these?" He half laid back in his chair to wiggle his hand into his pocket and pulled out a handful of them.

There was a general murmur. My mother grabbed the edge of the table. Bobby's grandfather, grinning around his dry pipe, plucked one of the candies from Bobby's palm, unwrapped it, and popped it into his mouth.

Mr. Galvin Wright had to use his gavel to hush the noise. My mother stood up straight and said, "Fine thing, risking your own life like that, just to make a point."

"Well, you're right about making a point, Maylene," he said, looking right at my mother and shaking his head as if they were having a private discussion, "but this is candy I keep around the house to get me out of the habit of smoking. I order it through the Government Issue catalog. It's perfectly safe."

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"I never said it was from them," said Bobby, who looked first at my mother and then searched the room until he found my face, but I pretended not to notice.

When we left, my mother took me by the hand, her red fingernails digging into my wrist. "Don't talk," she said, "just don't say another word." She sent me to my room and I fell asleep with my clothes on still formulating my apology.

The next morning when I hear the bells, I grab a loaf of bread and wait on the porch until they come back up the hill. Then I stand in their path.

"Now what d'you want?" Bobby says.

I offer the loaf, like a tiny baby being held up to God in church. The weeping girl cries louder, her sister clutches Bobby's arm. "What d'you think you're doing?" he shouts.

"It's a present."

"What kind of stupid present is that? Put it away! Jesus Christ, would you put it down?"

My arms drop to my sides, the loaf dangles in its bag from my hand. Both girls are crying. "I just was trying to be nice," I say, my voice wavering like the Bird Woman's.

"God, don't you know anything?" Bobby says. "They're afraid of our food, don't you even know that?"

"Why?"

"'Cause of the bombs, you idiot. Why don't you think once in a while?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The goats rattle their bells and the cart shifts back and forth. "The bombs! Don't you even read your history books? In the beginning of the war we sent them food packages all wrapped up the same color as these bombs that would go off when someone touched them."

"We did that?"

"Well, our parents did." He shakes his head and pulls the reigns. The cart rattles past, both girls pressed against him as if I am dangerous.

"Oh, we were so happy!" my father says, rocking into the memory. "We were like children, you know, so innocent, we didn't even know."

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"Know what, Pop?"

"That we had enough."

"Enough what?"

"Oh, everything. We had enough everything. Is that a plane?" he looks at me with watery blue eyes.

"Here, let me help you put your helmet on."

He slaps at it, bruising his fragile hands.

"Quit it, Dad. Stop!"

He fumbles with arthritic fingers to unbuckle the strap but finds he cannot. He weeps into his spotted hands. It drones past.

Now that I look back on how we were that summer, before the tragedy, I get a glimmer of what my father's been trying to say all along. It isn't really about the cakes, and the mail order catalogs, or the air travel they used to take. Even though he uses stuff to describe it that's not what he means. Once there was a different emotion. People used to have a way of feeling and being in the world that is gone, destroyed so thoroughly we inherited only its absence.

"Sometimes," I tell my husband, "I wonder if my happiness is really happiness."

"Of course it's really happiness," he says, "what else would it be?"

WE WERE UNDER ATTACK is how it felt. The Manmensvitzenders with their tears and fear of bread, their strange clothes and stinky goats were children like us and we could not get the town meeting out of our heads, what the adults had considered doing. We climbed trees, chased balls, came home when called, brushed our teeth when told, finished our milk, but we had lost that feeling we'd had before. It is true we didn't understand what had been taken from us, but we knew what we had been given and who had done the giving.

We didn't call a meeting the way they did. Ours just happened on a day so hot we sat in Trina Needles's playhouse fanning ourselves with our hands and complaining about the weather like the grownups. We mentioned house arrest but that seemed impossible to enforce. We discussed things like water balloons, T.P.ing. Someone mentioned dog shit in brown paper bags set on fire. I think that's when the discussion turned the way it did.

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You may ask, who locked the door? Who made the stick piles? Who lit the matches? We all did. And if I am to find solace, twenty-five years after I destroyed all ability to feel that my happiness, or anyone's, really exists, I find it in this. It was all of us.

Maybe there will be no more town meetings. Maybe this plan is like the ones we've made before. But a town meeting is called. The grownups assemble to discuss how we will not be ruled by evil and also, the possibility of widening Main Street. Nobody notices when we children sneak out. We had to leave behind the babies, sucking thumbs or blanket corners and not really part of our plan for redemption. We were children. It wasn't well thought out.

When the police came we were not "careening in some wild imitation of barbaric dance" or having seizures as has been reported. I can still see Bobby, his hair damp against his forehead, the bright red of his cheeks as he danced beneath the white flakes that fell from a sky we never trusted; Trina spinning in circles, her arms stretched wide, and the Manmensvitzender girls with their goats and cart piled high with rocking chairs, riding away from us, the jingle bells ringing, just like in the old song. Once again the world was safe and beautiful. Except by the town hall where the large white flakes rose like ghosts and the flames ate the sky like a hungry monster who could never get enough.

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The online world can be a bit strange. For instance, a search for Ms. Oates's recent books in one of the online booksellers brought up the titles Beasts, Faithless: Tales of Transgression, I'll Take You There, Middle Age, *the young adult novel* Big Mouth & Ugly Girl, *and the latest "Rosamund Smith" novel,* The Barrens.

It also brought up a link that said "Customers who wear clothes also shop for clean underwear."

Perhaps there's someone who knows as much about bookselling as Ms. Oates knows about storytelling who can explain this sales tactic. In the meantime, here's a dark tale from a modern master of the form.

The Haunting

By Joyce Carol Oates

THERE'S NOTHING! YOU hear nothing. It's the wind. It's your dream. You know how you dream. Go back to sleep. I want to love you, stop crying, let go of me, let me sleep for sweet Jesus's sake I'm somebody too not just your Mommy don't make me hate you.

In this new place Mommy has brought us to. Where nobody will know us Mommy says.

In this new place in the night when the rabbits' cries wake us. In the night my bed pushed against a wall and through the wall I can hear the rabbits crying in the cellar in their cages begging to be freed. In the night there is the wind. In this new place at the edge of a river Mommy says is an Indian name — *Cuy-a-hoga*. In the night when we hear Mommy's voice muffled and laughing. Mommy's voice like she is speaking on a phone. Mommy's voice like she is speaking, laughing to herself. Or singing.

Calvin says it might not be Mommy's voice. It's a ghost-voice of the house Mommy brought us to, now Mommy is a widow.

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I ask Calvin is it Daddy? Is it Daddy wanting to come back?

Calvin looks at me like he'd like to hit me. For saying some wrong dumb thing like I am always doing. Then he laughs.

"Daddy ain't coming back, dummy. Daddy is dead."

Daddy is dead. Dead Daddy. Daddy-dead.
Daddydeaddead. Deaaaaaddaddy.

If you say it enough times faster and faster you start giggling. Calvin shows me.

In this new place a thousand miles Mommy says from the old place where we have come to make a *new start.* Already Mommy has a job, in sales she says. Not much but only temporary. Some nights she has to work, Calvin can watch me. Calvin is ten: old enough to watch his little sister Mommy says. Now that Daddy is gone.

Now that Daddy is gone we never speak of him. Calvin and me, never when Mommy might hear.

At first I was worried: how would Daddy know where we were, if he wanted to come back to us?

Calvin flailed his fists like windmills he'd like to hit me with. Told and told and told you Daddy is D-E-A-D.

Mommy said, "Where Randy Malvern has gone is his own choice. He has gone to dwell with his own cruel kin." I asked where, and Mommy said scornfully, "He has gone to Hell to be with his own cruel kin."

Except for the rabbits in the cellar, nobody knows me here.

In their ugly rusted old cages in the cellar where Mommy says we must not go. There is nothing in the cellar Mommy says. Stay out of that filthy place. But in the night through the wall I can hear the rabbits' cries. It starts as whimpering at first like the cooing and fretting of pigeons then it gets louder. If I put my pillow over my head still I hear them. I am meant to hear them. My heart beats hard so that it hurts. In their cages the rabbits are pleading *Help us! Let us out! We don't want to die.*

In the morning before school Mommy brushes my hair, laughs and kisses the tip of my nose. In the morning there is a Mommy who loves me

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again. But when I ask Mommy about the rabbits in the cellar Mommy's face changes.

Mommy says she told me! The cellar is empty. There are no rabbits in the cellar, she has shown me hasn't she?

I try to tell Mommy the rabbits are real, I can hear them in the wall in the night but Mommy is exasperated brushing my hair, always there are snarls in my curly hair especially at the back of my neck, Mommy has to use the steel comb that makes me whimper with pain saying, "No. It's your silly dream, Ceci. I'm warning you: no more dreams."

Now that Daddy is gone we are learning to be cautious of Mommy.

Always it was Daddy to look out for. Daddy driving home, and the sound of the pickup motor running off. And the door slamming. And Daddy might be rough lifting us to the ceiling in his strong arms but it was all right because Daddy laughed and tickled with his mustache, and Daddy brought us presents and took us for fast swerving drives in the pickup playing his CDs loud so the music thrummed and walloped through us like we were rag dolls. But other times Daddy was gone for days and when Daddy came back Mommy tried to block him from us and he'd grab her hair saying, What? What the fuck you looking at me like that? Those fucking kids are *mine*. He'd bump into a chair and curse and kick it and if Mommy made a move to set the chair straight he'd shove her away. If the phone began to ring he'd yank it out of the wall socket. Daddy's eyes were glassy and had like red cobwebs in them and his fingers kept bunching into fists, and his fists kept striking out like he couldn't help himself. Especially Calvin. Poor Calvin if Daddy saw him holding back or trying to hide. Little shit! Daddy shouted. What the fuck you think you're doing, putting something over on your fucking Dad-*dy*? And Mommy ran to protect us then, and hid us.

But now Daddy is gone, it's Mommy's eyes like a cat's eyes jumping onto us. Mommy's fingers twitchy like they want to be fists.

I want to love you, honey. You and your brother. But you're making it so hard....

Our house is a row house Mommy calls it. At the end of a block of row

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houses. These are brick houses you think but up close you see it's asphalt siding meant to look like brick. Red brick with streaks running down like tears.

This is a city we live in now, it's a big city and far away from where we used to live. Mommy says nobody will follow us here, and nobody will know us here.

Mommy says don't talk to neighbors. Ever.

Mommy says don't talk to anybody at school. Any more than you need to talk. Understand, kids?

Mommy smiling at us. Mommy's eyes shining she's so happy.

Nothing was ever proved against Mommy.

Mommy says, Know why? Because there was nothing to be proved.

When Daddy rode away the last time in the pickup we saw from the front windows. We saw the red taillights rapidly receding into the night. We were meant to be sleeping but we never slept, the voices through the floorboards kept us awake.

Later there was Mommy running outside where a car was waiting. Whoever came to pick her up, we didn't know. They drove away and later I would think maybe I had dreamt it because Mommy said she had not left the house and how do you know what's real and what you have dreamt? When they asked me I shook my head, I shut my eyes not-knowing. Calvin told them Mommy was with us all that night. Mommy slept with us, and held us.

I was only five then. I cried a lot. Now I'm six, and in first grade. Calvin is in fourth grade. Calvin had to be kept back a year, for *learning disability*. That's all right with him Calvin says, he doesn't get picked on so much now. He's one of the big boys now, nobody better pick on *him*.

Whoever came to question my brother, if it was the nice social worker lady bringing us oatmeal cookies she baked herself, or the sheriff calling us by our names like he knew us, Calvin would say the same thing.

Mommy held us all that night long.

The cellar. That is forbidden to Calvin and me.

Mommy says nothing is down there. No rabbits! For Christ's sake will you stop, both of you. *There are no rabbits in this house.*

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The cages are still in the cellar, though. There are some outside in the back yard almost hidden by weeds but there are more in the cellar, rabbit hutches Calvin says they are. Mommy has called about the cages in the cellar, and the smell in the cellar, and the cellar walls that ooze oily muck when it rains, and the roof too that leaks, and Mommy starts to cry over the phone but the man hasn't come yet.

The cellar! I wish I didn't think about it so much. In the night when the rabbits cry for help it's because they are in the cages in the cellar trapped.

Let us go! We don't want to die.

In our other house built on a concrete slab there was no cellar. Then Daddy moved into a mobile home as he called it, that was on just wheels. Here the cellar is like a big square dug in the ground. The first time Mommy went away and we were alone in the house, we went into the cellar giggling and scared. Calvin turned on the light — it was just one light bulb overhead. The steps were wood, and wobbly. The furnace was down there, and a smell of oil, and pipes. In a corner were the rabbit hutches, Calvin called them. Ugly old rusted wire cages stacked together almost to the ceiling. We counted eight of them. The cellar smelled bad, especially the cages smelled. You could see bits of soft gray fur stuck in the wires. On the concrete floor were dried rabbit turds Calvin said they were, little black pellets. Oily dark stains on the concrete and stains Calvin teased me about saying they were blood.

A smell down here of old musty things. Muck oozing through the walls after a heavy rain. Calvin said, Mommy would kill us if she knew we were down here. He scolded me when I reached inside one of the cages, where the door was open, saying, "Hey! If you cut yourself on that, if you get tet'nus, Mommy will give me hell.

I asked Calvin what *tet'nus* is.

In a sneering voice like he was so smart, because he was in fourth grade and I was only in first, Calvin said, "Death."

I was afraid Calvin would see, I had scratched my arm on the cage door. I don't know how, it just happened. Not a deep cut but like a cat's scratch, it was bleeding a little and it stung. I would tell Mommy I'd scratched my arm on the sharp edge of a packing crate.

It was then I saw something move in one of the cages farthest back in

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the corner. A shadowy furry shape. A gleam of small close-set eyes. I gave a little cry, and grabbed at Calvin, but he shook off my arm.

Calvin made a scornful snorting noise he'd got from Daddy. When Daddy would say drawing the word out like he liked it — *Bull-shit.*

I told Calvin that almost you could see a rabbit there. You could see the other rabbits in their cages. Almost.

Calvin called me a dumb dopey girl. Yanking at my arm to make me come with him, back upstairs.

Lots of times now Calvin calls me worse things. Nasty things to make me cry. Words I don't know the meaning of except they're meant to be nasty like words Daddy called Mommy in the last days Daddy was living with us.

Saying now, "If she finds out we're down here I'm gonna break your ass. Anything she does to me, I'm gonna do to you, cunt."

Calvin doesn't mean it, though. Calvin loves me. At school where we don't know anybody, Calvin stays close to me. It's just that words fly out of his mouth sometimes like stinging wasps. Like with Daddy, and Daddy's fists.

They don't mean to hurt. It just happens.

Now Daddy is gone it's so strange to us, Mommy plays his music.

Daddy's music she complained of. His CDs. Heavy metal mostly, Calvin calls it. Like somebody kicking kicking kicking a door. Low and mean like thunder.

Now Daddy is gone Mommy buys bottles like Daddy used to bring home. One of them has a mean-looking wild boar head on it Calvin says is a giant pig living in a swamp that's been known to eat up a little girl *alive and kicking.*

Now Daddy is gone Mommy has his guitar, picking at the strings and trying to strum chords. Daddy's old guitar he hadn't touched in years he'd left behind when he moved away. One of the strings is broke but Mommy doesn't care. Mommy gets loud and happy singing *on the banks of the O-hi-o* and *yonder stands little Mag-gie, suitcase in her hand.* Mommy has a way some nights in the kitchen straddling the guitar across her legs and strumming it and moving her head so her long beet-colored hair ripples to

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almost her waist. Songs Mommy doesn't know the words to she sings anyway. *Yonder stands little Mag-gie, suitcase in her hand, little Mag-gie was made for lovin', cheatin' another man another man man man!* Calvin says Mommy can't play that old guitar worth shit but Mommy's so pretty now her face is mostly mended and her hair grown out, nobody's gonna notice.

In school I'm so sleepy my eyelids keep shutting. My head falls onto my folded arms on my desk top and there's a woman asking is something wrong. I don't recognize her right away then I see she's my teacher, leaning over me.

I can't remember her name. She smells like erasers not like Mommy who smells so sweet and sharp when she goes out.

"Ceci? You can tell me, dear. If there's anything you wish to confide. If...."

I shut my eyes tight. It's like wood smoke in my eyes, how they burn and sting. I feel myself freezing like a scared rabbit.

"...there's anything wrong at home. Every morning you look so...." My teacher pauses licking her lips. Not knowing what she means to say. When Daddy went away, and we were told he would not be coming back you could see in people's eyes how they didn't know what words to use. They could not bring themselves to say *Your father is dead.* They could not say like Calvin *Daddy is dead. Dead-daddy.* My teacher can't bring herself to say *Every morning you look so haunted* for this is not anything you would say to a little girl whose father has gone to Hell to dwell with his own cruel kin.

"...look so hollow-eyed, dear. Don't you sleep well at night?"

I shake my head the way Calvin does. Tears spill from my eyes. I'm not crying, though. Before anybody can see I wipe my face with both my hands.

In the infirmary the nurse removes my shoes and pulls a blanket up over me so that I can sleep. I'm shivering and my teeth are chattering I'm so cold. I hold myself tight against sleep but it's like the bulb in the cellar suddenly switched off and everything is dark and empty like there's nobody there. And after a while somebody else comes into the infirmary. Her voice and the nurse's voice I can hear through the gauzy curtain pulled

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around my cot. One voice saying, "This isn't the place for that child to sleep. Not at school. She's missing her school work."

The other voice is the nurse's. Saying quietly like there's a secret between them. "She's the Malvern girl. You know...."

"Her! The one whose father...."

"It must be. I checked the name."

"'Malvern.' Of course. The boy Calvin is in fourth grade. He's fidgety and distracted, too."

"Do you think they know? How their father died?"

"God help us, I hope not."

Nasty things were said about Mommy. Like she'd been arrested by the sheriff's deputies. That was not true. Mommy was never arrested. Calvin ran hitting and kicking at kids who said that, jeering at us. Mommy was taken away for questioning. But Mommy was released, and was not ever arrested. *Because there was not one shred of evidence against her.*

During that time Mommy was away a day and a night and part of a day, we stayed with Aunt Estelle. Mommy's older sister. Half-sister Mommy spoke of her with a hurt twist of her mouth. We didn't have to go to school. We were told not to play with other children. Not to wander from the house. We watched videos not TV and when the TV was on, it was after we went to bed. In that house there was no talk of Daddy. The name *Malvern* was not heard. Later we would learn that there had been a funeral, Calvin and I had been kept away. Aunt Estelle smoked cigarettes and was on the phone a lot and said to us your mother will be back soon, you'll be back home soon. And that was so.

I hugged Auntie Estelle hard, when we left. But afterward Mommy and Aunt Estelle quarreled and when Mommy drove us a thousand miles away in the pickup with the U-Haul behind she never said good-bye to Aunt Estelle. That bitch, Mommy called her.

When Mommy came home from what was called *questioning* her face was sickly and swollen and there were fine white cracks in it like a plaster of Paris face that has been broken but mended again. Not too well mended, but mended. You could hardly see the cracks.

Eventually we would cease seeing them. Mommy grew her hair out

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long to shimmer and ripple over her shoulders. There was a way Mommy had of brushing her hair out of her eyes in a sweeping gesture that looked like a drowning swimmer suddenly shooting to the surface of the water. *Ah-ah-ah* Mommy filled her lungs with air.

With a lipstick pencil Mommy drew a luscious red-cherry mouth on her pale twisty mouth. Mommy drew on black-rimmed eyes we had not seen before.

Mommy strummed her guitar. It was her guitar now, she'd had the broken string mended. Saying, "It was his own choice. When one of their own comes to dwell with them there is rejoicing through Hell."

By Christmastime in this new place Mommy has quit her job at the discount shoe store and works now at a café on the river. Most nights she's a cocktail waitress but some nights she plays her guitar and sings. With her face bright and made up and her hair so glimmering you don't notice the cracks in Mommy's skin, in the drifting smoky light of the café they are invisible. Mommy's fingers have grown more practiced. Her nails are filed short and polished. Her voice is low and throaty with a little burr in it that makes you shiver. In the café men offer her money which she sometimes accepts. Saying quietly, Thank you. I will take this as a gift for my music. I will take this because my children have no father, I am a single mother and must support two small children. But I will not accept it if you expect anything more from me than this: my music, and my thanks.

At the River's Edge Mommy calls herself Little Maggie. In time she will be known and admired as Little Maggie. She's like a little girl telling us of the applause. Little Maggie taking up her guitar that's polished now and gleaming like the smooth inside of a chestnut after you break off the spiky rind. Strumming chords and letting her long beet-colored hair slide over her shoulders, Mommy says when she starts to sing everybody in the café goes silent.

In the winter the rabbits' cries grow more pleading and piteous. Calvin hears them, too. But Calvin pretends he doesn't. I press my pillow over my head not wanting to hear. *We don't want to die. We don't want to die.* One night when Mommy is at the café I slip from my bed barefoot and go downstairs into the cellar that smells of oozing muck and rot and

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animal misery and there in the dim light cast by the single light bulb are the rabbits.

Rabbits in each of the cages! Some of them have grown too large for the cramped space, their hindquarters are pressed against the wire and their soft ears are bent back against their heads. Their eyes shine in apprehension and hope seeing me. A sick feeling comes over me, each of the cages has a rabbit trapped inside. Though this is only logical as I will discover through my life. *In each cage, a captive.* For why would adults who own the world manufacture cages not to be used. I ask the rabbits, Who has locked you in these cages? But the rabbits can only stare at me blinking and twitching their noses. One of them is a beautiful pale powder-gray, a young rabbit and not so sick and defeated as the others. I stroke his head through the cage wire. He's trembling beneath my touch, I can feel his heartbeat. Most of the rabbits are mangy and matted. Their fur is dull gray. There is a single black rabbit, heavy and misshapen from his cage, with watery eyes. The doors of the cages are latched and locked with small padlocks. Both the cages and the padlocks are rusted. I find an old pair of shears in the cellar and holding the shears awkwardly in both hands I manage to cut through the wires of all the cages, I hurt my fingers peeling away openings for the rabbits to hop through but they hesitate, distrustful of me. Even the young rabbit only pokes his head through the opening, blinking and sniffing nervously, unmoving.

Then I see in the cellar wall a door leading to the outside. A heavy wooden door covered in cobwebs and the husks of dead insects. It hasn't been opened in years but I am able to tug it open, a few inches at first, then a little wider. On the other side are concrete steps leading up to the surface of the ground. Fresh cold air smelling of snow touches my face. "Go on! Go out of here! You're free."

The rabbits don't move. I will have to go back upstairs, and leave them in darkness, before they will escape from their cages.

"Ceci? Wake up."

Mommy shakes me, I've been sleeping so hard.

It's morning. The rabbit cries have ceased. Close by running behind our backyard is the Cuyahoga & Erie train with its noisy wheels, almost I don't hear the whistle any longer. In my bed pushed against the wall.

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When I go downstairs into the cellar to investigate, I see that the cages are gone.

The rabbit cages are gone! You can see where they've been, though, there's empty space. The concrete floor isn't so dirty as it is other places in the cellar.

The door to the outside is shut tight. Shut, and covered in cobwebs like before.

Outside, where cages were dumped in the weeds, they've been taken away, too. You can see the outlines in the snow.

Calvin is looking, too. But Calvin doesn't say anything.

Mommy says, lighting a match in a way Daddy used to, against her thumb, and raising it to the cigarette dipping from her mouth, "At last those damn stinking cages have been hauled away. It only took five months for that bastard to move his ass."

Burned alive were words that were used by strangers but we were not allowed to hear. *Burned alive in his bed* it was said of our father on TV and elsewhere but we were shielded from such words

Unless Calvin heard. And Calvin repeated to me.

Burned alive drunk in his bed. Gasoline sprinkled around the trailer and a match tossed. But Randy Malvern was a man with enemies, in his lifetime that was thirty-two years he'd accumulated numerous enemies and not a one of these would be linked to the fire and not a one of these was ever arrested in the arson death though all were questioned by the sheriff and eventually released and some moved away, and were gone.

Now the cages are gone. And now I hear the rabbits' cries in the wind, in the pelting rain, in the train whistle that glides through my sleep. Miles from home I hear them, through my life I will hear them. Cries of trapped creatures who have suffered, who have died, who await us in Hell, our kin.

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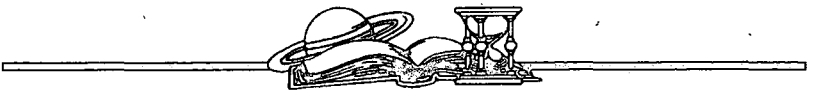

SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

THE EGG AND THE EYE AND THE EDGE

THIS IS a column about edges and borders and boundaries. Many people think of boundaries in terms of separation and division, but that — as you will soon see — is only one way to look at them. We regard edges as places where interesting things happen.

"What does this have to do with fantasy and science fiction?" you ask. We'll get to that later — really we will. But before we get to that, we're going to tell you how to do some weird and frightening experiments with eggs and osmosis and we're going to show you how your eyes act to exaggerate an edge, a tendency important to how we perceive the world. Then we'll get to matters that concern science fiction and fantasy.

* * *

ABOUT EDGES AND THE EGG

At first glance, you might think an egg, a smoothly rounded object, has no edge. That's true if you are thinking of an edge as something sharp and hard. If you think of an edge as a boundary, then the egg has a definite edge. The shell of an egg and the membrane just inside that shell form a boundary that separates what's inside the egg from what's outside.

To experiment with this boundary, you must remove the egg's shell without breaking the membrane. It's easy to do, and it's one of Pat's favorite odd science activities.

You'll need a few eggs, some white vinegar, a container big enough to hold your eggs, a cover for that container, and a big spoon. Put your eggs in the container so that they are not touching, then add

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enough vinegar to cover the eggs.

Bubbles immediately start to form on the eggs. The acid in the vinegar reacts with the calcium carbonate of the eggshell. In this reaction, the solid calcium carbonate crystals break apart to form calcium ions that float free in the liquid and carbon dioxide, which makes the bubbles that you see.

Cover the container, put it in the refrigerator, and let the eggs sit in the vinegar for 24 hours. After 24 hours, use your big spoon to scoop the eggs out of the vinegar. Be careful: the eggshell has been dissolving and the egg is very fragile.

Now dump out the vinegar. Put the eggs back in the container and cover them with fresh vinegar. Leave the eggs in the refrigerator for another 24 hours.

At this point, the eggshells are probably completely gone. Scoop the eggs out of the container again and rinse them carefully. If any of the membranes have broken, letting the egg ooze out, throw those eggs away.

Voila! You have a naked egg, an egg without a shell. It looks like an egg, but it's translucent. All that's holding it together is the membrane that's just inside the eggshell. This membrane flexes when you squeeze it.

Pat thinks that naked eggs are very cool, but Officer Dave, Pat's husband, thinks they are rather scary. Officer Dave is with the San Francisco Police Department and he's used to mixing it up with the local criminal element. But he finds the sight of a shell-less egg — an organic blob swelling in its translucent skin — a tad unnerving. (At least that's what he says when there's a bowl of naked eggs in the refrigerator beside the beer.)

What is a naked egg good for, other than disturbing members of the local constabulary? Well, here are a few ways to experiment with your naked eggs.

Take one naked egg and put it in a small container. (Pat uses a coffee cup.) Fill the container with water. Take another naked egg, put it in another small container, and fill that container with corn syrup. Leave the eggs overnight after warning your significant other that a scientific experiment is underway in the refrigerator.

In the morning, compare the two eggs. The egg that was in the water will be plump and firm and larger than it was before. The egg that was in the corn syrup will be shriveled and flabby.

You are observing the results of osmosis, the movement of water

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through a semipermeable membrane. The membrane that surrounds the egg is selectively permeable, which means it lets some molecules move through it and blocks other molecules. Water moves through the membrane easily. Bigger molecules — like the sugar molecules in the corn syrup or the proteins of the egg white — don't pass through the membrane.

When you put a naked egg in corn syrup, you are creating a situation where the egg membrane separates two solutions of different concentrations. The egg white is about ninety percent water; corn syrup is about twenty-five percent water. In this situation, random movements of water molecules cause them to move from the side of the membrane where they are more abundant to the side where they are less abundant. So water migrates from inside the egg to outside the egg, leaving the egg limp and flabby.

The same osmotic migration that makes the egg flabby helps preserve certain foods. When fruit is canned, the fruit sugars are concentrated. Any water-containing microorganism that tries to invade the fruity sugar syrup will lose its water to the syrup (like the flabby egg) and will die of dehydration.

When you put a naked egg in plain water, random movements of water molecules cause them to move from outside the egg, where they are more abundant, to inside, where they are less abundant. Under these circumstances, water moves into the egg, making it swell.

This naked egg feels plump because of the higher pressure inside the egg. As water moved across the membrane into the egg, the pressure inside the egg increased, stretching the membrane out to enclose the new, larger volume. If the membrane stretches to its breaking point then it will burst in what Paul calls an "osmotic bomb."

You can do other experiments with your naked eggs — putting them in salt solution or in solutions of food coloring. You can even boil them, solving that nasty problem of the eggshell that sticks to the egg. No shell, no problem.

Now we could make an analogy here, comparing the naked egg drifting in a cup of water to the genre of science fiction floating in the sea of popular culture. Some science fiction elements migrate out of the field into the mainstream — but wait! It's not time for that yet. First, we have to talk a bit about another edge — an edge created by your eye.

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About Edges and Your Eye

We'll start with another experiment — a quick and easy one that reveals something profound about how your eyes work. You'll need two pieces of 8 1/2" x 11" paper, a couple of pieces of tape, and a white wall.

Roll the sheets of paper into paper tubes that are eleven inches long (that's twenty-eight cm, for those who prefer metric) and about half an inch (that's one point three cm) in diameter. Use the tape to keep the tubes from unrolling.

With both eyes open, look at the white wall through one of the tubes. Notice that the spot of light that you see through the tube looks brighter than the surrounding wall, seen without the tube.

That's weird. The wall is the same, whether you are looking through a tube or not. Why does it look brighter through the tube?

But you can make the situation even weirder, if you like (and since you are a reader of science fiction and fantasy, we are confident that you would). Put one tube up to each eye, keep both eyes open, and look through the tubes at the white wall. Notice that both eyes now see bright spots.

Move the tubes so that the two spots overlap by just a little bit (like the circles in a Venn diagram). The place where the circles overlap will be brighter than either of the two spots.

Now overlap the two spots completely. Does the combined spot look brighter than either spot alone? You can find out by closing one eye. To us, it looks the same viewed with both eyes or viewed with one eye.

What's going on here? Well, if you read our column on seeing in the dark ("Nightfall Revisited," March 2000), you know that you see because light stimulates the light-sensitive cells in your eye. These cells are called photoreceptors — "photo" is the Greek word for "light." The photoreceptors of your eye are part of the retina, a layer of cells at the back of your eyeball. The photoreceptors detect light and the patterns that it forms on the retina, then sends this information to your brain via the optic nerve.

But, as Paul likes to say, "it's not quite as simple as that." There are about 100 million photoreceptors in each eye, and yet there are only one million neurons in the optic nerve. So the visual information sent down the optic nerve must be processed. (Paul says that ninety-nine percent of the information in

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the image on one retina is discarded, then one percent is sent on to the brain where your perception of the world is created.) The most important information is contained in edges, places where brightness changes rapidly. Less important are regions where brightness is changing gradually.

How does your eye make sure that your brain takes note of edges? Photoreceptors in your eyes send signals to your brain, but they also send signals to surrounding receptors. A receptor receiving light also sends signals to neighboring receptors, telling them to turn down their own sensitivity to light. Basically, a photoreceptor that is sensing light inhibits the surrounding receptors. This is known as lateral inhibition.

When you look at the white wall without a tube, you see a uniform field of brightness because all the receptors are equally inhibited by their neighbors. When you look through the tube, the spot of light is surrounded by the dark ring of the tube. The spot appears brighter than the rest of the wall because the receptors in the center of your retina are not inhibited by signals from surrounding receptors — the dark ring of the tube prevents this inhibition.

Lateral inhibition acts to enhance edges and boundaries. If you are looking at a white shape bordering on a gray shape, lateral inhibition will make the white shape brighter and the gray shape, by contrast, darker. Through lateral inhibition, your eyes and brain work together to draw a boundary more distinct and clear than the boundary that actually exists.

Your brain uses the brightness at the edges of a region to figure out the brightness of that region. When you look through the tube, the bright wall of the room looks brighter because it is next to the dark wall of the tube. Your eye and brain then assign this brighter value to the entire circle of light viewed through the tube.

K. C. Cole, formerly a writer at the Exploratorium and now writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, has compared this visual tendency to emphasize difference to the human tendency to draw boundaries in other areas: between different cultures, different races, different beliefs, different political views. She writes that people "seize on the differences between them, ignoring the differences within." She suggests that the existence of a boundary makes us focus on local differences and ignore similarities.

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About Science Fiction and Fantasy

Among those who write and read and edit science fiction and fantasy, people are always talking about what is and what isn't science fiction and what is and what isn't fantasy. They talk about the difference between science fiction and fantasy — and the difference between these categories of fiction and what is out in the so-called mainstream.

People seem to spend a lot of time trying to define the edge of the Field — what's included in science fiction and what isn't. People argue about it on on-line conferences and in bars at science fiction conventions. Some say that certain literary devices don't belong in science fiction. Others complain that certain books in the mainstream are appropriating science fictional tropes.

These folks seem to be thinking about boundaries in terms of separation and division. When we started writing this column, Pat had two agendas: she wanted an excuse to include her favorite egg experiments in a column and she wanted to encourage people to think about the boundaries between science fiction and other fiction in a new way.

You can think about the border between science fiction and mainstream literature as a semipermeable membrane (like the membrane of the egg). Some fictional elements seem to cross the membrane quite easily. Biological thrillers, like Michael Crichton's *Andromeda Strain*, with its extraterrestrial pathogens, are accepted by the mainstream quite handily, despite futuristic and scientific elements. The tropes of Cyberpunk have happily invaded the mainstream. And elements from mainstream fiction have also slipped across the boundary into science fiction. Back in the 1960s, the so-called New Wave introduced sex, drugs, and literary techniques into the science fiction field.

Or you can think of the border between science fiction and other types of literature as a perceptual illusion, like the bright spot that your eye sees when it looks through a paper tube. That spot on the wall is really no brighter than the rest of the wall, but your eye and brain have worked together to create the illusion that it's brighter.

"But wait!" we hear you protest. "Science fiction really is different from other kinds of fiction."

Is it? Pat has, in the past, taught a lecture course about science fiction

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at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She always begins the class with a lecture titled "What is Science Fiction?" since that's a question that invariably comes up early on.

In this lecture, Pat tells the class that she will read a few paragraphs from a book or story — and then the class will vote on whether these paragraphs are from a work of science fiction, fantasy, or mainstream literature. Then they will tell her why they voted as they did. Pat starts out easy — with an excerpt from an A. E. van Vogt story that includes anti-gravity, a ray gun, and a multi-eyed alien. Then she works her way around to works that are more subtly science fictional — from J. G. Ballard and Ray Bradbury. Her favorites, of course, are the ones that make the students stop and stare.

"As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." This, the opening line from Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, usually gets a laugh — the uneasy laughter of people who know they are being tricked. The students know the line is from *Metamorphosis* and they know that Kafka is shelved with literature, but they also know that the central event in the story — the transformation of Gregor — is a fantastic event, belonging to fantasy. Pat goes on to use other stories to challenge her students, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Carol Emshwiller's *Carmen Dog*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. By the end of the discussion, the students are raising examples of their own.

The lines are not firm; the edges are not clearly defined. And that, we think, is a good thing. The edge of the ocean, where the agitation of the surf mixes air and water in the presence of sunlight, is a biologically rich environment. The boundary where two cultures meet — whether it's at the border of a country, the border of a neighborhood, or the cultural clash of a first contact in a science fiction story — can produce interesting tensions. Interesting things happen at the edge.

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Here we bring you the tale of a heist, but as you might expect from Mr. Di Filippo, this story is not the sort of thing you're likely to find portrayed on any of the many TV crime shows. Not yet, anyway, but perhaps the day after tomorrow...

Speaking of the near future, Mr. Di Filippo reports a new book or two will be out before too long. In addition to the four books he published in 2002 (the collections Little Doors, *and* Babylon Sisters, *the novel* A Mouthful of Tongues, *and the novella* One Year in the Linear City*), he expects a collection of "Plumage from Pegasus" columns to appear later this year and a novel entitled* Spondulix *is in the works.*

Seeing Is Believing

By Paul Di Filippo

RON FEWSMITH WAS ABOUT to rob a bank.

Armed only with a color Palm Pilot. In person, not virtually.

Pausing momentarily outside the heavy glass doors of Merchants' Trust, Fewsmith mentally ticked off the steps in his plan again. Recollections from a hundred heist films interrupted, racing across his cinemaphile's brain. But as customers bustled past him, intent on doing their business this bright Monday morning, Fewsmith broke his reverie, realizing he shouldn't dawdle too long in this spot, lest he attract attention. Still, he hesitated a moment longer, highlighting the stages of his scheme.

He felt assured about all aspects involving the human element. Long months of diligent experimentation had left him confident that no individual in the bank would offer him any resistance, so long as he held firmly to his little Digital Assistant and remained free to deploy it. In fact, events should transpire so smoothly that no employee of the bank would realize that a robbery was even in progress. Only reconciliation of the

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day's transactions later that night would reveal a shortage of cash. And by then Fewsmith would be safely home, untraceable.

No, his only risk lay in the security cameras. The cameras made him sweat. There was no way that he could alter the images recorded by these monitors. Hence his disguise and adopted persona.

Fewsmith wore a large handlebar mustache reminiscent of one a nineteenth-century pugilist might have favored. Colored contacts altered his eyes. His clothing betokened some recent immigrant to these shores, perhaps a rube from the Balkans or outermost Albania. And his burlesque accent had been practiced for days.

Thus armed and accoutered Fewsmith felt, on the whole, confident of success. So: no more hesitation over this highly practical debut of his invention. Into the bank!

After joining the short line of customers standing more or less patiently in the chute of velvet ropes, Fewsmith quickly advanced to lead position. When called by the next available teller, Fewsmith put on a big smile and strode boldly forward.

The teller — a young pimple-faced fellow wearing a clip-on tie — instinctively smiled back. "How can I help you, sir?"

Fewsmith removed a sheaf of tattered foreign currency from his pocket and plopped it on the counter. "You change?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir, you'll have to see one of our customer service reps for that."

"No understand. Please to use translator."

Fewsmith proffered the Palm Pilot and the clerk reluctantly took it. "Is this like some kind of computer dictionary? What do I do?"

"Push button here."

The teller depressed the indicated control.

Instantly a series of whirling alien glyphs, phantasmagorical in their variety and motions, flooded the color screen. When these icons cleared they were followed by a compressed digital movie, flickering at a subliminal rate. Fewsmith had carefully crafted the loop out of snippets from an old industrial training film that depicted stacks of cash being removed from a drawer and passed through a teller's slot.

The clerk seemed staggered for a millisecond by this mini-movie, but quickly recovered, his faculties apparently undisturbed. "I'm

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sorry, sir, but this screen's blank. Your machine must be broken."

Handing the device back, the teller reached into his cash drawer and removed a half-dozen fat stacks of banded cash. His hands seemed to be operating independently of his consciousness, as if two separate personalities shared his brain and body. The effect was disconcerting even to Fewsmith, who had witnessed it before.

Passing the money to Fewsmith, the teller said, "Thank you, sir. Have a nice day."

Fewsmith deposited both the bait money and the U.S. cash in capacious coat pockets. "Tenk *you*."

Fewsmith nodded to the armed security guard on the way out, ready with a second digital movie, tailored for just such a situation and safely stored in the terabyte memory of the PDA, to show the guard if necessary. But the rent-a-cop suspected nothing and merely nodded politely back.

Outside the bank Fewsmith walked several blocks to an alley. He discarded his mustache in a dumpster, found the change of clothes he had hidden there and swiftly donned them. He transferred the money to new pockets. The Albanian costume joined the mustache in the trash. He retrieved his car another few blocks on and headed home.

Triumph! Willadean would be most proud of him! Perhaps she would even finally consent to go to bed with him.

And if not — well, Fewsmith tremulously admitted a harsh yet welcome truth to himself for the first time. If Willadean continued to play hard to get, he now knew for sure that he could have her against her will, or any woman he wanted.

"Tenk you very much!"

STINGO STRINE TILTED back the Paw Sox cap atop his balding head and scratched his gleaming pate. He studied the imploring, hopeful, anxious face of the president of Merchants' Trust, a corpulent fellow named Shawn Hockaday. The immaculately besuited fat man looked as if he were on the verge of tears. Strine felt a deep urge to help the poor guy. But at the moment he felt as baffled as the executive himself obviously did.

"Play the tape again, please," Strine urged in a desperate bid for inspiration.

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Hockaday thumbed the remote control, and both Strine and he concentrated on the screen of the small TV in the president's office.

The camera perspective was from high over the shoulder of the teller at his station. The black-and-white images were remarkably crisp. All events unfolded in plain sight. Nonetheless, they remained as baffling as ever.

The mustached man lent his PDA to the clerk, who studied it for only a moment before returning it, along with approximately one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in unmarked, un-dye-packed bills. Then the customer left and the teller went calmly about his business.

The tape ended and Hockaday turned to Strine. "It was a simple holdup note on the PDA screen, wasn't it? That's what it had to be."

"Well, you know, that's exactly what I thought at first. Some new high-tech twist on the oldest routine imaginable. But a simple note demanding dough doesn't explain the rest of it."

Strine referred to the fate of the hapless teller, who had been immediately suspected of collusion with the thief. Upon discovery of his malfeasance, he had been hauled shaking and stammering into police interrogation. Steadfastly denying all wrong-doing or even knowledge thereof, the kid had consented not only to a polygraph test, but also to a course of sodium pentothal. Both approaches had been conclusive.

As far as the teller knew, nothing unusual had occurred that day. No robbery, no foreign customer. When shown the tape of his actions, he had fainted. Revived and white-faced, he looked as if he had walked into his apartment and discovered his doppelgänger screwing his girlfriend.

"Any luck on enlarging the screen of the PDA so we could read it?" asked Strine.

"None. The face of the device was blocked by Mr. Fergus's body."

Strine stood up with barely contained irritation. The absurd face of the robber, his baffling actions — both irked him immensely. How had this guy done it? In fact, *what* had he even done? This situation was more frustrating than the Buckner Tunnel. Not since the botched rotator-cuff surgery that had ended his professional career had he felt so powerless.

Strine hated to look uncertain in front of a client, especially one this important. Strine's caseload had been pretty pitiful these past six months, and scoring big here could garner him lots more business.

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Generally, Strine avoided hypothesizing openly before a client, but in this case frustration forced the words out of him.

"Maybe the PDA was chemically tainted with some kind of knockout drug or hallucinogen. But the perp didn't wear gloves. And what kind of drug has those effects? Leaving someone awake, making him act against his will, then wiping his memory? Could it be hypnotism? It didn't look like any hypnotism I've ever seen. And it was over too fast."

"Mr. Strine, we summoned you because we felt we needed more coverage than the authorities could provide. But if you feel the dimensions of this investigation are beyond you, perhaps we should call in a larger agency."

"No! Give me a fair shot at it. I've only just come on the case. If I don't have something solid to report in twenty-four hours, then you can yank me off it."

"Very well then. I'll be awaiting your first report."

Strine was ushered genteelly out the back door. Out on the street, he belabored his brain.

Who could he consult about this? What kind of expert? A hacker? But there had been nothing extraordinary about the PDA, no online mumbo-jumbo. No, the answer had to lie in what Fergus had seen on the screen —

What Fergus had *seen*. Now Strine knew whom he had to visit.

If only Professor Parrish Maxfield would talk to him after that very unfortunate date Strine had taken her on.

Willadean Lawes riffled the stack of cash gleefully as Ron Fewsmith looked on with hopeful adoration, an adoration tinged, however, with no small impatience.

Her lustrous tawny hair — a mop big as a muskrat — swirled as Willadean tossed a handful of bills into the air with a shout. She failed to note her boyfriend's subliminal impatience; or, if noted, she could not be bothered to cater to the emotion. The sight of more money than she had ever before beheld utterly captivated her. To think that little Willadean, whom all the good folks of Pine Mountain, Georgia, had looked down on as white trash, now had enough money to buy the best house back home in her native town. Well, maybe not the old Bishop mansion, but at least a house better than the drafty shack she had been born and raised up in.

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And this was just the start! From here on out, Ron and Willadean were on Easy Street. They'd soon be deeper in cash and all the good things of life than a mudbug in muck. Finally Willadean Lawes would have what she deserved. And when Willadean rolled back into Pine Mountain, dressed in designer clothes and sitting pretty behind the wheel of a big new Cadillac, she'd just like to see Sherri Bishop try to look down her nose at her. Why, her sneer would be big as a doublewide trailer!

Fewsmith reached across the table and gently stroked Willadean's wrist. "Dearest, what do you say? How about a little reward for your daring bank robber?"

Leaning across the table, Willadean gave her beau a peck on the cheek. His disappointment rivaled her glee.

"Willadean — " Fewsmith began stridently.

"Oh, hush now, Ron. You know I ain't letting you into my pants until after we're married. And there won't be no marriage until we are on a totally solid financial footing. That's why we need to start thinking about making our big score, and soon."

Fewsmith's hand strayed menacingly toward his holstered Palm Pilot, but Willadean only leered in supreme confidence.

"Now don't go thinking you're gonna start sending instructions to my ol' Executive Structure that easily. It's a neat trick you've discovered, but it only works if the victim ain't ready for it. All's I've gotta do is shut my eyes or look away, and your gimmick is useless. And don't think I didn't see you uploading all those porno loops into that gadget, thinking to imprint me with 'em. Lord, I never knew anyone could make plain ol' sex as complicated as those folks did! But you'll just have to restrain yourself a little longer. Grub up some rocks in the pasture, or chop some logs for the woodpile. That always worked for my Daddy after Momma passed on, God bless her soul."

Fewsmith looked disconcerted. "Pasture? Woodpile? I live in a condominium, Willadean!"

"No matter, you get my drift."

Fewsmith's face assumed a devious expression. "What if I use the Level One Bypasser on some other woman then? Would you be angry with me?"

Willadean experienced a deep satisfaction at this proposal. Having Fewsmith despunked by someone else would be a relief. So long as the

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unlucky bitch didn't set her claws into Willadean's gravy train. But she was crafty enough not to show her true feelings. Frowning, she said, "Well, I don't know. I'd be awfully jealous at first. But I suppose every man's entitled to a little tomcatting before he gets hitched."

Smiling broadly, Fewsmith said, "It's settled then. I promise you I'll be extremely careful, Willadean. I'll use all the proper protection. You have nothing to fear in the way of venereal repercussions."

Willadean paused a moment to consider her own variegated past love life, then said, "That's mighty thoughtful of you, Ron." Then, despite her initial lack of interest in the topic, she became intrigued by the notion of Ron Fewsmith attempting to seduce some strange woman, even with the aid of his Consciousness Bypassing Device. Hard to imagine any sexual bravado from this joker, even armed with his digital seducer. Why, when she had latched onto him in that yuppie bar a year ago, she damn near had to drag him out from under his barstool.

"You just gonna walk up to some gal on the street and zap her?"

"Far from it. I have a certain, ah, conquest in mind. Someone who's seen fit to deride my scientific abilities in the past. My only regret is that she won't retain any memory of the proof that my theories were correct all along."

PROFESSOR PARRISH MAXFIELD had a run in her stockings, a long hideous laddering from ankle to hemline (and that border hovered well above her knees), visible from across a large room, and the sartorial blemish couldn't have surfaced at a worse time. Not only had she been scheduled that morning to deliver an important presentation to the Board of Directors of Memetic Solutions, but now the infuriating yet attractive Stingo Strine had shown up on her office doorstep. His humble attitude, literally cap in hand, failed to mollify Parrish. Not only was she irritable from the massed gazes of the Boardmembers on her legs rather than on her Power Point slides, but the memory of her first and only date with Strine still rankled.

Last summer, Parrish had promised to take her nephew Horace to a weekend Pawtucket Red Sox game. The Paw Sox were the farm team for the Boston Sox , and usually put on a good show.

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Prior to the game, Horace had cajoled her into angling for an autograph from the Paw Sox's pitcher, one Stingo Strine. The popular Strine was attempting a comeback after complicated shoulder surgery, a comeback that would soon prove impossible. But on that day he was still cocky and confident.

Horace had led his aunt to the lowest tier of stadium seats. From this vantage, fans could dangle balls and pens down via plastic pails on ropes to the players as they entered onto the field. Spotting Strine, Horace had begun yelling the pitcher's name and jagging his lure like an overanxious fisherman.

Strine had been ready to walk past the offered baseball until he looked up and spotted Parrish. Smiling broadly, he took the ball and scribbled something across it, then trotted out onto the field.

Gleefully, Horace hauled up his prize. He studied the ball and a confused expression clouded his face.

"Auntie Parrish, what's this mean?"

Parrish took the ball. Strine had indeed autographed it. But he had also included the comment "Pitchers do it until they get relief," and his phone number.

After her indignation had faded, Parrish inexplicably found herself experiencing a growing interest in this arrogant ballplayer. Did he think he was propositioning a married woman? Did he care? His performance that day, pitching several respectable innings despite obvious pain, also intrigued her.

After returning Horace to his parents, Parrish called the number on the ball.

Next weekend Strine arrived at her house in a vintage Mustang. He wouldn't tell her where they were going. With good reason, for their destination proved to be a strip club named Captains Curvaceous, "popular with all the hip guys on the team."

The evening went downhill from there, culminating in a short wrestling match in the Mustang which made Parrish feel as if she had somehow vaulted back to 1965.

Several calls from Strine afterward had earned him nothing but the blast of receiver smashing into cradle.

And now here he stood, suitably hangdog and repentant. But intrinsically changed? Parrish had her doubts.

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Before she could order him out, Strine launched into an obviously well-rehearsed speech.

"Professor Maxfield, I just want you to know that I'm here for professional reasons, not personal ones. But before I get into the nature of my visit, I'd just like to apologize for my treatment of you last year. I was under a lot of stress then, physical and emotional, and I was hooked on pain meds too. I realize that's not an excuse, but I just wanted you to know where my head was at then. It was a crummy place to be, and you stepped right into it. But things have changed for me since then."

"Oh, yeah? How? Did you get traded to a Little League team?"

Strine winced. "No, I left the game entirely. I finally admitted to myself that my pitching career was over, without ever getting to the majors. It was real hard to let go of a childhood dream, but I think I'm better off now."

Parrish felt bad, despite her ire. Maybe she had misjudged this guy. "So, what are you doing now?"

Strine put his cap back on and took out a business card. Parrish took it, read it, and was stunned.

"Private investigator?"

"It was my uncle's firm. He took me in full-time last year just before he retired. I used to help him during the off-season, so I had a pretty good grasp of the business."

"And a case brings you here to me now?"

Strine pulled up a chair and leaned forward earnestly. He recounted the whole story of the Merchants' Trust robbery, concluding, "So the only thing I could come up with is, this guy's using some radical, unknown kind of mind-control device. And then I remembered that was your field."

Indeed, during various nervous moments of that awful evening Parrish had babbled about her researches. She was surprised that any of her words had penetrated against the competing assaults of lap dances and jello-wrestling by bimbos with more silicone in them than a Home Depot caulking aisle. It was a miracle that Strine had remembered her end of the conversation, such as it was.

"Well, I wouldn't call what we do here at Memetic Solutions 'mind-control.' Although we are studying the way various ideas can colonize people's minds. But, yes, there are certain applications...." Despite her

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resolve not to get involved with any aspect of Strine's life, Parrish found herself becoming professionally interested. "Summarize for me again what the robber did."

"He convinced an innocent honest kid to steal from his employer and then forget all about it. It was almost like he temporarily stole the kid's consciousness, or bypassed it entirely."

Parrish frowned. "Bypass — No, it couldn't be — "

"What? Tell me! You onto something?"

Parrish stood up and began to pace. She turned to confront Strine with a demand.

"Tell me — what do you know about modern theories of consciousness?"

"About as much as you know about pitching."

"Well, let me see if I can bring you up to speed. One of the most radical new theories about how our brains work maintains that the self you imagine to be in control of your mind — the structure you might think of as your ego or consciousness — is simply a shallow mask over much deeper processes. And it is these processes which determine our behaviors."

Strine scowled. "You're telling me we're all zombies or puppets? I don't buy that."

"Oh, but in a way, we are. That is, if you insist on identifying only with these facades. But if you chose to displace your sense of self deeper — well then, there's no problem."

"So you say."

Parrish felt rhetorical fire building, her typical reaction to encountering disagreement. "Look, any seemingly reasoned actions you take, any ideas or opinions or conclusions you formulate, any likes or dislikes you characterize as quintessentially 'you' — none of these actually originate in the outer levels of your brain. None of them are a result of the supposedly rational chains of reasoning you can observe, which are in reality always constructed after the fact. They all flow from the depths upward. Even sensory impressions are not permitted to be acknowledged by the mask of consciousness unless the lower levels first select them and pass them on — a process called 'outing.'"

Strine's face reflected the contortions he was going through while

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trying to internalize this re-ordering of existence. "What about free will then?"

"Oh, you've still got free will. It just doesn't reside where you imagined it did."

Strine pondered this, then finally said, "It's like the Wizard of Oz."

"Huh?"

"You remember. Everyone thinks Oz is this big glowing head. But Oz is really a little guy pulling levers in a hidden booth."

"Almost exactly! But now imagine that the glowing head has some semblance of fake autonomy and believes that it's really running things. 'Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,' the head says on its own, and believes it! We call this face of Oz 'Level One,' the aspect of your mind that imagines it runs things. Level One is a two-dimensional skin, without actual free will. Level *Two* is analogous to the subconscious, the deep three-dimensional realm where all the important things get hashed out. And the Central Executive Structure is the intermediary between them, the mechanism that selects what will be outed. Level One simply performs and believes whatever the Central Executive Structure sends it. And Level One has no direct access to the workings of Level Two."

Strine lifted his cap and brushed a hand across his bald strip. Parrish thought the humble gesture rather charming.

"Man, this is your job, to sit here all day and think up this weird stuff? And I thought my business was oddball. How can you hope to get anything marketable out of this kind of blue-sky stuff?"

"Well, admittedly, the hypothesis I just outlined has stalled at the theoretical level. I myself have moved on to other areas of research. But there was one guy here who just wouldn't let go of this paradigm. A real fanatic. He kept pushing and pushing, claiming that he was learning the 'protocols' of the Central Executive Structure and the 'grammar' of Level Two. He said his goal was to insert orders into Level Two, which would then be transmitted through the CES and manifest as programmed actions in the subject. He actually got some intriguing results. But he refused to take new direction from the Board, and eventually he got fired."

Standing excitedly, Strine said, "A mad scientist with a grudge. That's perfect! What's his name?"

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Before Parrish could answer, her intercom bleeped.

"Doctor Maxfield, Ron Fewsmith is here to see you."

DJUSTING THE DRAPE of his jacket, Fewsmith opened the familiar door to Doctor Maxfield's office. He pictured himself as the quiet yet deadly protagonist of the Coen Brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There*, going to his fateful interview with his wife's lover. How often had he passed through this door, eager to share his latest findings with his beautiful co-worker, only to be shot down like a lovestruck duck falling for a decoy? For that was what Maxfield was: a cold, hard, wooden imitation of the woman he needed her to be. She had derided both his timid overtures of undying love and his scientific discoveries. Thank goodness he had fallen in with Willadean, strict though she was! At least Willadean cared for him! True, the difference between the two women was like the difference between Veronica Lake and Christina Ricci. But now the invincible Professor Maxfield would pay for years of insults with her glamorous body, which luckily did not share the hardened nature of her mind. A mind completely amenable to whatever Fewsmith chose to insert within it.

But there was no sense in appearing slovenly, even though Maxfield would retain no memory of his visit. He did not want to endure her contempt even for one embarrassing minute that would later be wiped from her mental record.

Fewsmith strode boldly into the dragon's den. But he was brought up short by the unexpected presence of another person, standing at some remove from Maxfield and her desk. The stranger was a largish, hulking, low-browed type. Obviously not a fellow scientist, but probably one of the janitors here to replace a lightbulb. Or, at a stretch, a phone technician perhaps. Although the man held no tools — No matter, he'd be easy to dismiss.

"Hello, Parrish. It's good to see you again."

"I don't wish I could say the same, Ron. What do you want?"

"I'm here to share something of vast importance with you, Parrish. A discovery so enormous that it will revolutionize life as we know it. But I can only tell you in private."

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"No can do, Ron. You can spill anything you want to tell me in front of my colleague here, Professor Strine."

Fewsmith narrowed his eyes on the stranger. Was that ridiculous cap he wore advertising a *sports team*? "*Professor* Strine? Really? I don't believe I've ever seen any of your papers before in the customary journals."

The fellow glared back. "I only publish in, ah, foreign ones."

The man was a buffoon. Fewsmith had no idea what connection Strine bore to Parrish Maxfield, but he was plainly a trivial nuisance. Strine would be easily disposed of once Maxfield had gotten her dose of erotic instructions. "Oh, that explains it then. Pardon me. Very well, I'll be happy to let both of you in on my discovery. You first, Parrish. Just take a look here. "

Fewsmith unlimbered his PDA and held it in front of Maxfield's eyes. He triggered the sequence intended specifically for her, and in one short compressed burst the visual commands raced past her sight and penetrated her Level Two.

Fewsmith stepped back and keyed up the general-purpose immobilizing sequence he had once intended to use on the bank guard. "Now it's your turn, Professor Strine."

But Strine did not react as expected. Instead, he leaped upon Fewsmith and began struggling for control of the Palm Pilot. The two men careened around the office clumsily, tumbling over chairs and dislodging books from the bookcase, until Strine finally wrested the PDA away. Sweating, frightened and disheveled, Fewsmith staggered back against the outer door, fumbling for the handle. Grinning nastily, Strine advanced on him.

But then a long low moan interrupted, and both men found their attention drawn to Doctor Parrish Maxfield.

She had stripped off all her clothes and stood writhing and fondling herself like Pamela Anderson at a satyrs' convention.

Strine froze, and the naked professor hurled herself upon the detective, the closest male available, in order to satisfy the script she was running.

Fewsmith used the opportunity to escape. He dashed out past the startled receptionist, fully expecting Strine to collar him at any moment. But the man never appeared, and, out in the parking lot, Fewsmith slowed, panting. He could safely assume that his pursuer had his hands full.

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After all, those routines he had scripted — sexual exercises whose delights Strine was even now usurping from their rightful recipient! — were enough to keep any man busy.

Even if the lucky, damnable bastard was trying to escape them!

The only suitable covering to cloak a naked woman available at Memetic Solutions proved to be a large silver mylar sheet from one of the animal testing labs, where semiotic simians passed primitive memes back and forth in controlled circumstances.

Wrapped up like a baked potato in foil, Professor Parrish Maxfield sat on an office chair next to her pile of ripped and unsalvageable clothing. Her disarrayed hair framed an angry face. Her legs were crossed at the knees and one anomalously shod foot, suspended in midair, bobbed with furious impatience.

Strine admired her composure. He doubted that had their roles been reversed, he could have shown such sangfroid.

Battling the amorous advances of the professor had taken all of Strine's efforts. Luckily, the office door had slammed behind Fewsmith on his hasty way out, and no curious co-worker had intervened to witness the tussle.

Dominated by the script Fewsmith had uploaded to her Central Executive Structure, Parrish had wrestled Strine to the floor. There, oblivious to his clothed state and lack of cooperation, she had enacted a variety of sexual situations, one posture after another, her face simulating all the requisite emotions and reactions, the appropriate repertoire of sounds and encouragements issuing from her lips. All Strine could do was to hold her tight and constrain her wild bucking so that she did not harm herself.

Needless to say, wrestling thus with a naked woman — particularly one he had earlier fantasized about — caused no small degree of excitement in Strine's own pelvic region, despite the bizarre and unwarranted nature of the attempted copulation. Before too long, Strine's pants could have illustrated the tent pages from the REI catalog.

Thankfully, once Parrish reached the end of the enforced simulation, her instant confusion and lack of immediate memories, her distress at suddenly finding herself naked — all these created a confusion that helped Strine conceal his problem until it had subsided.

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Strine had initially said, "Everything's okay. Don't worry. It was Fewsmith, but I stopped him. Wait here."

With a half-assed excuse he had convinced the curious but respectful receptionist of the urgent need for a covering of some sort, and, once the blanket was found, darted back into Parrish's office. She wrapped herself up, and Strine explained everything to her.

Parrish's last memory ended with the receptionist announcing Fewsmith's arrival. So far as Parrish knew, the man had never even entered her office.

As the full implications of what she had just undergone hit her, Parrish Maxfield moved from a flushed embarrassment to rage.

"That bastard! He planned to use me like some kind of mindless sex toy! Well, there's no question now. I'm coming with you when you go after him."

"Hold on now a minute. This could be very dangerous. I don't think you realize — "

"Dangerous? How could that little twerp be dangerous? We've got his gadget, don't we?"

"Sure. But he must have another, or can get one fast. It's just a Palm Pilot, after all. It's these files that are deadly, and I'm sure he's got backups of those."

"Hand that over."

Strine gave Parrish the PDA. She jabbed at its buttons.

"Don't!"

"I'm just bringing up the directory. Hmmm.... These file names are pretty cryptic. 'Marching,' 'Surrender,' 'Handover'.... Hard to tell what they do."

Something bothered Strine. "How can he construct and review these hypnotic routines without being affected by them himself?"

Parrish powered off the Palm Pilot and handed it back. "Oh, that's simple. If he's really discovered the language of the subconscious, then he must have learned about some command strings, such as one that informs the CES to disregard whatever follows. Kind of like stop and start and skip codons in DNA and protein replication."

"Um, if you say so. But still, I don't feel you should, ah, expose yourself any further to this guy's crazy nastiness."

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"Ridiculous! I'm a big girl, and now I have my own score to settle with Mister Fewsmith. Besides, I can provide backup for you."

Strine considered. He was hardly averse to spending more time in the company of Professor Parrish Maxfield.

"Okay. What's our next step then?"

"First we get Fewsmith's address from Human Resources. Then we'll need to stop by my apartment for some clothes."

Parrish toggled the receptionist, and within minutes had the information they needed.

"Um, do you want me to go to your place and bring the clothes back here?"

"That would waste time. I don't care what people will think when they see me like this. Do you?"

Strine grinned broadly. "Actually, I'd be flattered to be connected to your current condition, as long as you were smiling about it."

Parrish tried to look sober, but failed. Her wry grin made Strine desire her all the more. "Don't get any funny ideas. This is strictly a business arrangement."

"Right." Strine reminded himself that many business arrangements he had been involved in ended up in one or both parties getting screwed.

The young receptionist's hands stopped in mid-glide above her keyboard, and her eyes behind her funky glasses widened to dramatic dimensions. Holding her head high, Parrish strode by her with a curt, "I'm taking the rest of the day off, Enid."

Half suspecting another attack by Fewsmith, Strine hovered protectively over Parrish until they were safely in his car.

"Got rid of the Mustang, I see."

"It's garaged. I use it on the weekends. But it's too conspicuous for stakeouts and tailing people."

"Still, an old Buick with bodyrot isn't much of a babe magnet."

Strine sighed. "It came with the firm. My uncle — Jesus, I don't know what kind of sex maniac you take me for! Just because I tried to get in your pants once."

"Twice, counting today."

Strine grew angry. "Listen, honey, a different kind of guy would have jumped your bones while you were out of it without a qualm."

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Parrish looked contrite. "That's true. I apologize. I guess I'm a little more distraught about what happened than I wanted to admit."

"Okay. Apology accepted."

"By the way — did you just use the word 'qualm?'"

"What's the matter? Can't a ballplayer — an ex-ballplayer — have a literate vocabulary?"

"Sure. But 'qualm?'"

"How about 'the aginbite of inwit' then?"

"Oh, a Joyce scholar in juvenile headgear!"

Strine shrugged off the jab. "Being on the road most of the summer means you read a lot."

Parrish seemed done with teasing. She said nothing, but continued to study Strine until he actually grew uneasy.

Once Parrish had dressed again, they headed across town to Fewsmith's last-known home.

On the way, Strine wanted to talk some more about this whole new way of regarding human awareness.

"Despite everything I've seen, I just can't quite believe our brains work the way you and Fewsmith claim they do. Like now, when I'm talking with you. How can some shallow mechanical construct be formulating all this speech?"

"It's not. Your Level One is just relaying rapidly formed sentences that have been outed by the CES from your Level Two region."

"I just can't buy that."

"That's because one of the most vital artifacts of Level Two is a belief in the primacy of Level One, as a kind of public face for daily interactions. Look, where did you get that word 'qualm' a minute ago? Was it a conscious choice? Could you have predicted even a millisecond ahead of time that you'd use that word? No, of course not. As Professor Jeffrey Grey says, 'Consciousness occurs too late to affect the outcomes of the mental processes it's apparently linked to.' Simply put, the Level One persona you imagine to be in charge is nothing more than a monomolecular film over the depths of your mind. Let me ask you this: who's driving?"

"Huh?"

"Who's driving the car right now while you're talking with me? Are you consciously steering and using the brake and the accelerator? Or are

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subconscious routines handling everything, well below your Level One awareness?"

"But that's just training and habit and, and — "

Strine's brain — every level — began to hurt. He stopped talking before he made it worse.

They parked a block away from Fewsmith's building. Without any concierge, the premises offered little barrier to Strine's expert skills: he awaited the entry of a resident and slipped in behind the unsuspecting fellow. Soon he and Parrish stood in front of Fewsmith's apartment door.

"What now?" whispered Parrish.

Strine placed an ear to the door. "I don't think anyone's home. I'm going in. You willing to break the law?"

"Against this jerk? Of course."

The interior of Fewsmith's home — and it was definitely his, as revealed by some junk mail on a tabletop — was in wild disarray, revealing a hasty exit, possibly permanent. Dresser drawers had been left open, and a suitcase with a broken zipper lay discarded.

"He's split. Damn it! *Now* how do we find him?"

Parrish held up a frilly slip. "Can you believe that creep was actually living with a *woman*? What did he want with *me* then? Just revenge?"

"Maybe his regular girlfriend couldn't conduct science-type pillowtalk with him."

"Yeah, right, like that routine he zapped me with even included foreplay."

Strine kicked angrily at the abandoned suitcase. "If only we could read those files without being forced to enact them! They might give us a clue. Say, maybe I could put myself through them, and you could take notes and try to guess what each one represented...?"

Parrish pondered this suggestion. "No, too iffy. How could we be sure what real-world action was represented by some odd set of calisthenics? And what if some routines were meant to inflict harm on the subject or on others? No, we need to be able to review the routines harmlessly, just as Fewsmith does — Wait a minute! I know someone who might be able to do just that!"

"Let's go then!"

On the way to the car Strine asked, "Who is this person? Another scientist?"

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"No, she's my guru, Kundalini Glastonbury."

This time it was Strine's turn to stare at Parrish.

BUSY DAYDREAMING about her new life to come back in Pine Mountain — she had just shocked all the mousy women at the church social with her chic clothes and big-city ways for the hundredth time — Willadean was unprepared for the alarming entrance of her frustrated lover-in-name-only.

Fewsmith's mild face was reddened with consternation and exertion. His flyaway hair resembled a badly groomed Shih Tzu's. He was huffing and puffing and it took him a few seconds to get his words out.

"They know it's me! They know it's me!"

Willadean jumped up, instantly tense and infuriated. "Who knows about you? Out with it, peckerhead! What happened?"

Fewsmith recounted the fiasco in Parrish Maxfield's office. Willadean relaxed just a little when he finished his tale.

"Okay, let's look at this objectively like. You show this scientist gal your little computer screen and she gets all sexed-up and goes into heat. Then the stranger starts brawling with you. Maybe he was just jealous you turned on his nerd girlfriend. How's any of this connect you to the bank job? Your old flame ain't gonna remember nothing, and the guy who whomped you don't know you from Adam's uncle."

"But why did he jump me so fast? Maxfield hadn't even had time to react to the instructions, but he was on me! It was as if he recognized what I was doing. That's the only explanation. The cops have already been to visit them, seeking their help, and they were warned in advance of what I could do."

Willadean glowered. "You know, you just might be right for once. Okay, we can't take any chances. We're gonna have to go for the big score right now. To heck with any more planning! Luckily we've still got a few hours until the armored car pickup at five. Meanwhile, we pack up a few things right away, load our car, and cruise around till five, killing time. Once we have the dough, we hit the road with no one the wiser. Are you sure the guards pick up a million dollars every day?"

Fewsmith seemed to be regaining a little composure. "At least." He

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went to his desk on which sat a PC, unlocked a desk drawer and removed a second Palm Pilot. He cabled it into the bigger machine. "You start packing. I need to download a few routines. It's all prime material, derived from several exemplary films, including a segment from one very fatal thriller for anyone who crosses us this time. In fact, I just hope that guy who was in Maxfield's office shows up again! I'll settle his hash!"

Willadean patted the scrawny shoulders of her meal-ticket. "That's the way to talk, tiger. But don't forget my part just cause you've got a hard-on to get your revenge. Where's that tape I need?"

Fewsmith dug out a standard videotape cassette. "Here you go."

"And this is gonna work just as good as your dinky computer thing?"

An exasperated sigh gave evidence that Fewsmith's temper was still not in equilibrium. "Of course! I take control of people through their visual systems. It doesn't matter how the instructions are delivered. They could come through a *flip book* if you could flip the pages fast enough! No, there's nothing to worry about on that end. But are you sure you can get into the control room?"

Willadean bumped Fewsmith with her bountiful hip, almost sending him staggering. "Didn't I spend a couple of months already cozying up to this bird? He's already let me in once while he was alone on duty, and we tore us off a — I mean, we had us some smooching."

Fewsmith looked forlorn. "Willadean, if I thought you were giving your favors out left and right to everyone but me — "

Enveloping the smaller man in her capacious bosom, Willadean said, "Aw, honey, you're so cute when you're jealous."

And so goddamn annoying, she thought.

Parrish felt a little guilty intruding on Kundalini Glastonbury at this hour. Glastonbury conducted a lunchtime session of astral travel instruction for busy office workers who couldn't attend her nighttime classes. Then, from one to two, the guru locked her classroom door and took her own vegan lunch, followed by a session of meditation and pranayama breathing to get herself centered for the rest of her equally busy afternoon. And now here Parrish blew in, interrupting her spiritual guide's only private time. But such impoliteness couldn't be helped if they were to

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catch Fewsmith before the renegade memetician could subject anyone else to his mind games.

On the drive over, Strine had quizzed Parrish with genuine curiosity about her outré spiritual practices. He seemed baffled at the seeming incongruity with her scientific side. Finally Parrish had gotten exasperated.

"Listen, nothing says science has all the answers about the universe. Haven't you ever heard of 'hidden variables'?"

"No. What are those?"

"The postulated rules of the universe that exist down below any level we can observe, and which would explain all the seeming inconsistences of modern physics and other disciplines. I'm a firm believer in them. And my teacher helps me access that side of existence."

Strine snorted. "Fairies. Elves. And I thought ballplayers were superstitious."

Parrish folded her arms across her chest. "All we care about now is results, not how we get them. At least give Kundalini a chance."

"Wasn't that a John Lennon song?"

"Jerk!"

It took Glastonbury several minutes to respond to their insistent knocking. But at last she appeared, a petite woman with a mop of tight blonde curls and startling eyes like chips of Arizona sky, wearing a worn green leotard that had plainly seen many a backbend.

Seeing only Strine at first, Glastonbury scowled. "Mister, this had better be the number one crisis of the last ten kalpas — " But when Parrish stepped forward, the bristling yogini softened.

"Kundalini, I'm sorry to interrupt your private time, but we desperately need your help."

"Come in, dear, come in."

Glastonbury was brought up to speed in only minutes. Unlike Strine, she easily accepted Parrish's paradigm of human mentality as conforming to facts she already knew under another guise.

"I think I can handle these deviant instructional blasts," said the small woman with utmost confidence. "They're just like intrusions by Tibetan *dons* into the *alaya* level of consciousness." Not for the first time, Parrish found herself wondering just how old Glastonbury was. "I'll

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disconnect my mind from my body entirely. The routines might run internally, but they won't make it past my temporary barrier. But tell me this: what am I looking for?"

Strine, who had been impolitely rolling his eyes at this talk, said, "Except for his vindictiveness against Ms. Maxfield, Fewsmith seems motivated mainly by money. So we're after something like the trick he pulled at the bank, something involving cash or other valuables."

"Very well. Just give me about five minutes to prepare myself. Then you can start showing me the movies."

Glastonbury did not assume a full lotus, but rather reclined on her back on the floor, her muscles going slack.

"The corpse position," whispered Parrish.

After allowing the stipulated time to pass, Parrish positioned herself to hold the PDA above Glastonbury's open eyes. Then, one by one, she launched the various mental-subversion files.

Aside from a few minor twitches, Glastonbury exhibited no effects from watching the preemptive commands. Apparently her Level Two and CES had been completely snipped out of the motor loop.

"Jesus," said Strine, "I never would've thought it possible — "

Parrish paused long enough to spare her partner a gloating smile.

Finally the directory was exhausted. Parrish handed the demonic device back to Strine, and he stuck it in a back pocket. The investigators sat back for several minutes while Glastonbury came out of her suspension.

"Whew! I feel like I just had a three-day-workout with Mister Iyengar's evil twin! This technology is absolutely perverted, Parrish. I trust you'll make sure it does not spread."

"Yes, mahatma."

"C'mon, c'mon! Any leads? Do you recall anything that could help us?"

Glastonbury fixed a penetrating gaze on Strine and said, "Before I gaze into my crystal ball, you must cross the gypsy's palm with silver."

Strine had his wallet out but stopped when the two women began to giggle. Chagrined, he repocketed his cash and finally joined them in laughter.

When they had finished chuckling, Glastonbury said, "There's one

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image that seems relevant. I saw people pointing to a giant television screen mounted on a building. Then the screen began showing them what to do. Money was involved somehow. But the rest of the details are hazy. My Level Two isn't much more forthcoming than yours, I'm afraid, after those unnatural assaults."

"Giant television on a building.... Not the stadium then — that screen's freestanding. It's got to be that bigscreen unit down in Blackmore Square. It's the only one in town. Let's go!"

Glastonbury made a bow to usher them out, which Parrish returned.

Give Strine credit: he tried to copy the elegant gestures of the women, despite ending up, thought Parrish, looking rather like a bobble-head dashboard figurine.

WAITING NERVOUSLY a few feet away from the parked Wells Fargo truck in Blackmore Square, Ron Fewsmith examined the bandages wrapping his left hand. Bulkier than required by any unswollen appendage, the wrappings concealed his deadly Palm Pilot, leaving the screen exposed. Wary of flashing his instrument of coercion — surely the police would be watching for just such a move after the bank heist — Fewsmith had conceived of this concealment. Additionally, the sympathy generated by the sight of the bandages should help focus the attention of his victims on the display.

Fewsmith felt confident of his ultimate success, despite his jitters. Had he not selected coercive routines from among the work of the finest auteurs? A shouted command from the old *Superman* TV show; some images from the sci-fi masterpiece *Strange Days*; crowd scenes from *Cotton Comes to Harlem* — What more would he need? Once Willadean succeeded in launching these subversive images upon the giant flatscreen mounted on the Berkeley Building — the mosaic of panels was now occupied by the feed from CNN — a carefully planned chaos would erupt, during which time Fewsmith would hijack the entire contents of the armored car, easily a million or more in unmarked cash. He and Willadean would rendezvous at their vehicle, then make good their escape.

Images of a naked, supplicating Willadean — fabricated solely from Fewsmith's imagination — swarmed his vision, distracting him for a

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moment from his fixity of purpose. If at this advanced stage of their relationship she still refused to let him have his way with her, then she'd find herself dumped on the side of the highway. Let her even go revengefully to the authorities and try to strike a plea bargain, if she wished. Fewsmith had nothing to fear. With his invention, he could become invisible at will. All he needed to do was immerse himself in some pleasant Mexican village, say, then program all the inhabitants to deny his very existence when questioned. He could live like a potentate — with his own harem — on the proceeds of this day's robbery, not to mention any future conquests.

A far cry from the humble and demeaning researcher's existence.

Recalling his old life led Fewsmith to relive his humiliating experience in Parrish Maxfield's office. He looked about the busy square for that hulking cretin who had assaulted him. Pedestrians thronged the sidewalks, nothing more than dismissable programmable robots, and traffic flowed in complicated patterns through the five-way nexus. No sight of that aggressive jerk though. But Fewsmith remained vigilant.

Two guards trundled out a bag-laden trolley from the bank door beside which Fewsmith stood. The other two guards stationed by the rear of the Wells Fargo truck instantly came alert, weapons poised.

At the same moment several bystanders shouted, "Look!" Fewsmith knew then that Willadean had succeeded in getting her tape to play.

Fewsmith felt particularly proud of the sequence of commands now cycling over and over on the big TV. First he had included the comic-book-hero command to yell "Look!" and to point at the screen. This insured that as soon as a few people were enraptured, the rest would quickly follow, obeying their natural instincts to follow a pointing finger.

But the next set of commands was a stroke of genius.

All around Fewsmith people began to take out their wallets and open their purses and throw their cash into the air.

Cars screeched to a halt. The few citizens not captured by Fewsmith's video began to dive after the flying dollars. As more people entered Blackmore Square they either became captivated by the money-throwing instructions or naturally fell to scooping up cash.

Within moments, the scene resembled the arrival of U.N. food trucks at a refugee camp. Any police arriving now would have their hands full.

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The four Wells Fargo guards were well trained, huddling protectively around their trolley and refusing to look anywhere except around themselves at eye-level. But they hadn't counted on the nature of the second assault.

Fewsmith triggered a blood squib in his bandages. Moaning in mock pain, he stumbled toward the uniformed men.

"My hand, my hand! Someone crushed my hand!"

The guards naturally looked down at Fewsmith's bloody hand. There they viewed a vivid shifting collage of scenes from *Groundhog Day*, *The Underneath*, *The Newton Boys*, and even that awful remake of *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Swordfish*. They instantly stiffened. Fewsmith said, "Follow me." Two guards began to push the trolley while the other two marched ahead like slave automatons to clear a path.

Fewsmith chortled once his car came into sight. Parked several blocks away in an alley that led conveniently out of the traffic congestion, the getaway vehicle was just as he had left it.

And there stood his woman by the car.

"Willadean," Fewsmith called out.

The woman turned.

Parrish Maxfield.

Strine drove like Hell's own perpetually summoned firemen toward Blackmore Square, just six blocks away. Already early confusing reports of trouble there had erupted from the car radio.

"We've got to stop the dissemination of the blipvert first," Strine said. "Then we can try to nab Fewsmith."

"Blipvert?"

"Sure, that's what these things are. Don't you remember Max Headroom?"

"Max whosis?"

Strine narrowed his eyes for a moment upon Doctor Parrish Maxfield before he had to swerve wildly to avoid a taxi stalled in their lane.

"What were you doing about fifteen years ago?"

"I was twelve, and busy building molecular models with Legos."

"You're that young?"

"You're that old?"

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"Forget it then. Just wait in the car while I go up to the control room. Good thing I was able to reach my uncle. He got the security codes and the location of the place from a buddy in the agency who installed their alarm system."

"I'll do no such thing. I'm going after Fewsmith myself. I owe that bastard a good kick in the balls."

Strine thought his head would explode. "You will not! It's too dangerous!"

"Who the hell are you? My nanny? Besides, I've got the perfect defense against Ronnie and his primitive toy. Now, if he had learned to program Level Two and the CES with sonics or haptics, we'd be in trouble. He would have been able to take over someone with a sound or a touch. Hmmm, I wonder if prior instances of this discovery formed the basis for a few legends? The Sirens, the Old Man of the Sea — "

"Forget all that. Besides, what kind of defense can you have? You have to look at him to nab him, and then he's got you."

Parrish patted her purse. "Don't you worry your little Level One about me. My secret weapon's safe in here."

Abandoning any attempts to convince the stubborn memetician of the foolishness of her plans, Strine concentrated on getting them as close as possible to the civic uproar in Blackmore Square. When they finally had to ditch their car, they were only a block away.

Strine began to trot toward the Berkeley Building, Parrish following gamely along.

"Don't look up!"

"Do you take me for an idiot?"

Darting around the mad masses of money-flingers and money-graspers, avoiding rogue cars in motion whose drivers had decided to take to the sidewalks, the pair ended up at the door of the Berkeley Building.

"There's Fewsmith!" exclaimed Parrish, pointing across the turbulent streetscene. "He's got some kind of entourage pushing a trolley and he's moving slow. I'll recognize his getaway car when I see it, and I think if I anticipate his vector I can beat him to it without him seeing me."

"No, don't," Strine said. But Parrish had already hotfooted off.

Strine hesitated a second, thinking to follow her. But the insanity in

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the square and the possibility for casualties determined his course of action, and he raced inside the building.

Safe behind the locked door of the control room, the unsuspecting horny technician knocked out cold upon the floor, Willadean Lawes surveyed the scene outside the tenth-floor window with immense satisfaction. She could spot the tiny figures of Fewsmith and the guards moving safely but slowly away from the armored car. Once her partner was definitely out of the chaos, she would leave behind the controls of the no-longer necessary bigscreen and hook up with him. But till then, she'd guard the room so that no one could halt the projection.

Polishing a small silver pistol on the cloth molding her pretty rump, Willadean thought of how best to dispose of Fewsmith, and when. Maybe after they got out of the country. Let him do all the driving, get exhausted and clumsy, and then he'd be good as dead. Sure, she'd lose the expertise with the gadget contained within his cooling brain, but who cared? A million large would last ol' Willadean a good long time. And she could be the belle of Baja as easily as the princess of Pine Mountain.

A solenoid latch clicked, and the outer door swung inward. Willadean trained her pistol on whoever was entering.

The intruder was a rough-edged, good-looking bruiser. Willadean felt her heart go thump-a-thump. Maybe this guy was another crook, out to share the score. If so, Willadean might have herself a new partner.

The guy's words broke Willadean's illusion. "Okay, I'm guessing you must be Fewsmith's woman. Better throw in the towel now, before anyone gets hurt. Your buddy's already captured."

Willadean risked a quick glance out the window and saw no confirmation of this joker's threat. She laughed. "Good try, pal. I was born on a Saturday, but not last Saturday. Now I think I'll measure you for a clay cabin."

"Wait! I've got something you want!"

Willadean's trigger finger eased back. "Now what might that be?"

The guy moved his hand slowly to his rear pocket and came up with a Palm Pilot.

"Just this!" he said, mashing a button.

Willadean tried to avert her eyes, but it was too late.

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The sound of breaking glass was followed before too long by a muffled thump from street level.

Strine let loose a gust of relief. "I *thought* that was what 'defenestration' meant!"

THE MESMERIZED GUARDS halted when Fewsmith did, standing like toy soldiers in the *Nutcracker*. Parrish felt a brief surge of fear, thinking she'd become the target of their rifles. But apparently Fewsmith had not written that routine into the command set he had instilled earlier in them.

An obnoxious leer overspread the rogue scientist's face, and Parrish felt her fear displaced by cold anger against this little weasel.

"Well, well, well — if it's not the dull-witted Doctor Maxfield. Have you dropped by to see if you can co-author a paper with me? If so, I'm afraid you're much too late."

As Fewsmith gloated, Parrish slinked her fingers into the purse slung from her shoulder. She knew she'd have to goad him into using the Palm Pilot and then match his actions precisely.

"I wouldn't want my name in the same journal as yours. You've warped an important discovery for selfish personal gain. Why, you're no better than that *Frenchman* who claimed to have discovered *N-rays*!"

Bristling at this vile scientific insult, Fewsmith raised his bandaged hand. "I think I'll let you have the fate I intended for your big dumb boyfriend. Look away if you want, but then of course I'll simply escape."

Parrish had her trump card in her fingers, held nearly out of her purse. "Do your worst! I'm not afraid. And he's not dumb!"

Fewsmith triggered his deadly sequence just as Parrish whipped her mirror into place, shielding her own eyes.

A look of utter horror flashed over Fewsmith's face, as he was overwhelmed by his best composition: a melange of images from *Go*, *An Affair to Remember*, *City on the Edge of Forever*, and *The Laughing Dead*. Then he was darting out into the street, looking frantically about for a moving car. Spotting a racing ambulance, he hurled himself beneath its wheels.

Once again Parrish turned her eyes aside in time to miss the worst.

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The cessation of the command sequence on the big public screen resulted in a gradual diminishment of the chaos in Blackmore Square, as the cycle of infection and reinfection ground to a halt, and even the most recently commandeered minds resumed their normal functioning. Trotting back to the center of the outbreak, alongside the incoming flood of EMTs, policemen, firemen, National Guard troopers and reporters, Parrish knew then that Strine must have succeeded, and she experienced a little surge of pride in his accomplishments. The emotion took her by surprise, but her flexible intellect smoothly integrated the new feelings into her estimate of the man.

The crowd of stunned, disoriented, and embarrassed citizens was parting like wheat before a thresher, as someone bulled through the mass. Parrish caught sight of a bobbing baseball cap and sped up to meet the detective.

Spotting her, Strine raced to her side. He hugged her, and she returned the gesture. But then he released her, a sober look replacing his joy at finding her unharmed.

"We're going to have some serious explaining to do, once they make the inevitable connection between us and Fewsmith, so we'd better get our story straight."

"What do you mean?"

"Just look around you! The two people who caused this disaster are both dead — apparent suicides, luckily — but the cops will still want to know how they did it."

Parrish pondered the matter. "I think we should tell them Ron bragged to us about some sort of novel aerosol CBW agent. They'll discount the bigscreen images as just visual noise meant to distract the bank guards. Anything but the reality. Fewsmith's discovery is too dangerous to release. Can you imagine the kind of irresistible dictatorship that could be set up by some madman conversant in the grammar of Level Two? No, much as it pains my scientific soul to say it, this knowledge has to be expunged."

"But how?"

"I saw Fewsmith's Palm Pilot crushed under the ambulance. That leaves yours and the videotape from the control room. I assume you took the tape? Good! Give them to me."

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Strine complied, and Parrish hammered the Palm Pilot against a nearby hydrant till it shattered. With Strine's help, she cracked the video case and unspooled the tape down a sewer grating.

"Now we race to Fewsmith's home before the cops even figure out the address, then erase any traces of his invention we find there. *Et voilà*, the world is saved!"

Strine looked at her admiringly. "You don't have any desire to take over Fewsmith's invention and run with it? This could mean a Nobel Prize for you. It was only Fewsmith's greed and hatred that stopped him from getting the honors he deserved."

"Nuh-huh! I'm not strong enough to resist the temptation. Are you?"

Strine appeared to be considering the matter. "Well, there are a few things I'd change."

"Like what?"

"Well, the attitude of a certain beautiful woman toward a certain ex-ballplayer named Stingo Strine."

Parrish smiled. "No need to use a machine. Consider it done."

"Really?"

"On the level." ☙

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE should be an interesting one. Here's some of what's on tap:

"Basement Magic" by Ellen Klages, a lovely tale from the 1960s about a young girl, a wicked stepmother, and a cleaning lady.

"The Incredible Steam Man" by Ron Goulart, concerning Harry Challenge's latest adventure in London.

"The Refuge Elsewhere" by Robert Sheckley, an adventure concerning a man in the Witness Protection Program and the unpredictable events that befall him.

We'll also have book reviews by Charles de Lint and James Sallis, Kathi Maio on *The Two Towers*, and perhaps a story from the likes of Bruce Jay Friedman, Arthur Porges, and Kit Reed. Be sure to keep your subscription up to date so you won't miss any of this year's surprises.

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The final volume was the *Not at Night Omnibus* (April 1937), which collected thirty-five stories from the earlier books, before Thomson decided to bring the series to an end because of a lack of good enough material. She left behind a legacy of not only one of the first regular series of weird fiction anthologies, but also a dozen volumes which should be considered a cornerstone of any *Weird Tales* collector's library.

— Stephen Jones

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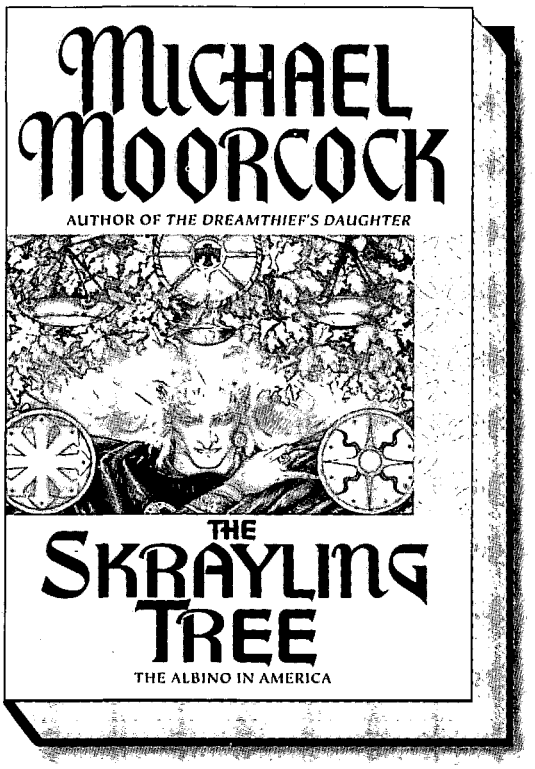

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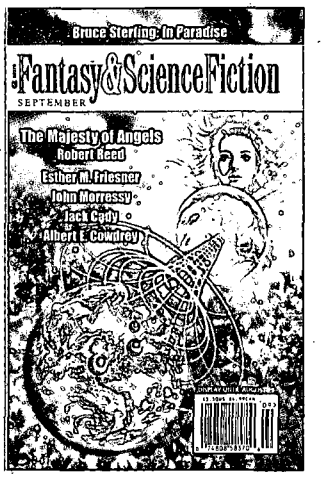

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